

The Long Road
By D.T. Scalberg

Chapter 1

There are many ways to spend an afternoon, going out to the movies with your friends, getting nose deep in a delightful book while lying on a couch, or sitting in a chair on a warm day. Or perhaps, it's something as simple as sitting down and watching a football game by yourself. However, for young Gilles Tremblay it was neither of these things, but instead a simple gathering with family in the middle of a park on a sunny summer afternoon. The sun shining down on them as Gilles and his family ate one of the homemade dishes that they had brought to their small picnic, each mouthful of food being washed down with a sip of juice. The entire event looking to have more in common with a scene out of an old film rather than any form of modernity.

“Gilles, could you please hand me the strawberries?” a voice asked, causing the boy in question to turn towards the man speaking as a smile emerged on the face of his mother at the mention of the fruit, they'd acquired from a nearby store with a sign boasting “Fraise a vendre”. The young boy turning and handing his father the small plastic box which held several dozen of the red, juicy, pieces of fruit in question,

“The Place de Sainte-Pierre is always beautiful this time of year” Gilles' mother declared as she watched several pedestrians go by, before taking a breath of the clean summer air. Savoring every smell and second of the first day off she'd had in several long weeks, earning a smile of mutual affection from Gilles' father.

“I now, it always reminds me of the evening we spent when we moved here,” Gilles' mother added as she looked at his father, causing the man to reply.

“That was what? 17 years ago,” as he placed a thumb on his chin.

“I believe it was 15,” coming quickly from his mother.

“How about we settle and call it 16” being Gilles' father's call for compromise, earning him an answer of.

“Always, dear,” from Gilles’ mother before the two partook in a loving kiss. A kiss which Gilles and his brother, James, reacted to by covering their eyes and making faces in mock disgust,

“Mom, dad, that’s gross.” The claim is causing the two parents to answer by simply breaking their kiss, before laughing at the naivety of their two sons.

“Alright boys, we’ll save it for home” Gilles’ father relented, turning his gaze towards the beauty of the setting sun.

“Besides, who would want to spoil a wonderful day such as this?” coming just as Gilles’ mother leaned on her husband’s shoulder and began.

“It’s so peaceful.”

“So warm” James added.

“So sweet” Gilles’s father finished, prompting James to look toward Gilles and smile before casually saying.

“It would be a shame if we left” the offhand way James said this prompting Gilles to turn and look at him in surprise before asking.

“James, what did you just say?” the question earning the attention of his mother and father in addition to that of his brother.

“Didn’t you hear me Gilles?” James asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Your brother was quite clear” coming from his mother, just as his father added.

“Yes” in a syncretized manner.

“I said.” coming from James just as the boy leaned forwards and his mother added.

“It” in a syncretized manner, followed by Gilles’ father.

“Would”

“Be a”

“Shame if”

“We” his father added, the three of them almost leaning over him as their eyes pierced him with three pairs of blank looks.

“Left” suddenly flying out of Gilles’s mouth, the sound of the word prompting the young boy to throw his hands over his mouth to prevent the words from becoming a reality. The final word in the long-syncretized sentence tugging at the center of his hand, threatening to break through the muscle and bone with each convulsion, causing Gilles’ pain as it refused to reenter his mouth. Before the word suddenly, and violently, burst through his hand, the pain causing him to cry out suddenly and throw his head back. His head landing on the soft grass, just before his eyes flew open and he found himself lying in bed. Deep breaths going in and out of his lungs as he noticed the thin layer of sweat which had formed on his forehead. Looking off to his left, Gilles’ cast a silent glance towards the small, red, alarm clock that lay on his bedside table, primed and ready to be used if he ever chose to turn on its alarm function. The exact time of 8:25 being plainly visible from where he lay, thanks to the sunlight that was filtering in through the blinds. A courtesy of the pleasantly warm weather and bright mornings that came to signal the end of the spring season and the beginning of the beautiful summer.

The light, and the warmth, of the sun’s rays that filtered in through the window causing Gilles to let out a long groan before pulling his blankets over his eyes and rolling towards the opposite wall of his window. Feeling the softness and comforting warmth of his blankets, making his body relax while his ears briefly strained to hear anything, but were only met with silence. A sweet, sweet silence that sent a subtle smile across Gilles’ face at the thought of his newfound luxury.

'Maybe moving wasn't such a terrible thing after all' popping into his mind as his eye lids grew heavy, his vision became hazy, and his breathing slowed down. The feeling of being drained of all his energy gradually disappearing as he felt himself fall back to sleep.

"Gilles! Gilles! Wake up!" coming suddenly, the declaration being accompanied by the door to Gilles' bedroom flying open, snapping the young boy out of his soon to be slumber and sending him shooting straight up in bed. His semi-conscious state barely allowing him to make out the white walls, closet, and window of his own room; let alone the mysterious figure in it, as his eyes darted around wildly. His eyes managed to scan the room three times before Gilles' vision began to clear up and he realized that he was in no danger, and that the house wasn't on fire. The realization coming just as he was clearly able to catch sight of a single, lightly tanned, brown-haired figure who stood next to his bed with a cheeky smile plastered from ear to ear.

"It's nice to see that you're up"

"Qu'est que tu veux James?" coming from the boy the exhaustion that caused the words to slur out from his lips only being countered by the irritation in his tone, eyes glancing back towards the clock next to his desk.

"C'est 8:30"

"Exactly," James countered as he put his hands on his hips, seeing a completely different meaning to the time.

"It's 8:30, keep this up and you'll sleep the day away", coming as he reached out, grabbed Gilles by his shoulder, and gave the young boy a gentle, yet firm, shake which Gilles met with a firm scowl.

"If you're so worried about wasting the day, why don't you spend your Saturday the way you want to and let me spend mine the way I want to?", he asked, his words causing James' smile to grown bigger.

“Now where would the fun in that be?” James countered, complete with the waving of his left-hand pointer finger before he turned and dashed out of the room, leaving a now wide-awake Gilles alone to either get dressed and start the day or to try and go back to sleep.

‘At least I still have my own room,’ running through his head as he let out another sigh and got out of bed, his eyes once again over to the clock to see the red numbers 8:35.

“And I was so close to going back to sleep too” slipping by his lips as he rose from bed, put on a green shirt, and a pair of black pants, before opening the door. His foot catching on something that made him stumble and nearly fall flat on his face as he left the tranquility of his room for the hallway. His face planted into the carpet only being averted as he grabbed onto a nearby bookshelf, which was probably the thing he’d tripped over.

“Or at least it will when mom and dad finish moving in” he muttered to himself in a decidedly low tone as he caught sight of the bare, white, walls of the hallway. Managing to step over several packing boxes that stood on either side of the hallway, avoiding them better than he had the previous morning. After all, the size of the new house, its living room, hallways, bedrooms, and bathrooms, had been one of the first things that Gilles had needed to get used to since he and his family had arrived at the house less than a week ago. While his old home had been taller than their current home, with two floors and a basement, it was far skinnier when it came to its width; one could reach out and touch the walls to regain one’s balance. Whereas this new house, while only one story, had hallways that were a good deal wider, three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and an attic; implications of which Gilles had learned during the first week since his family had arrived in their new home. The thought of the development that had caused the young, transplanted Quebecois to end up in Vancouver, Washington, 4,000 miles away from his native home of Montcalm, Canada, causing Gilles to let out a sigh as he reached the kitchen.

"Hey Gilles" warmly coming from James, as though the two hadn’t seen each other a few minutes earlier, as he walked in and took a seat at the family’s four-person table, a greeting that he ignored.

“Gilles, your brother said ‘hello’” his father added, pulling down his newspaper as he did so, forcing Gilles to turn and give James a cold.

“Hello”, before turning back to his father for a warmer.

“Bonjour, papa”, then reaching towards the center of the table, where a freshly made, steaming pile of pancakes sat on a white and blue plate.

“Aren’t you up a little early for a weekend?” causing Gilles’ weary face to drop slightly.

“Yeah.....I am” being all he could say as he sat down at the kitchen table before he pulled a couple onto his own plate, his comment causing his father to look between the two boys in confusion.

“Did I miss something?”

“It’s fine dad, Gilles’ just upset about falling face first into a pile of boxed yesterday” James casually answered as he raised a glass of orange juice to his lips, earning him a gage from Gilles.

“You said you wouldn’t say anything about that!”

“It’s not such a big deal,”

“Maybe it wouldn’t have been if you hadn’t woken me up at 3:30 after staying up till midnight”, Gilles, politely, or as politely as he could, countered, his point earning him a shrug of James’ shoulders but a raised eyebrow from his father.

“James, I thought I told you that your mother and I gave you separate rooms for a reason” he began, gently folding his newspaper as he did so.

‘Because we now have the room’ Gilles thought, as his father turned towards James.

“Because we thought that the two of you were getting too old to be sharing the same room, given your difference in your sleep schedules” their father added, letting out a sigh before he reached to take a sip of his tea.

“Well, no harm no foul, it’ll give you more time to explore the neighborhood”.

“Will we ever!” James eagerly added, a bright smile appearing on his face.

“I can’t wait to see if there are any gyms, pools, and basketball courts” he continued bringing up his fist and raising a finger for each thing he named, as Gilles poured himself a glass of orange juice.

“Or maybe-”

“I hope there’s a good park” Gilles cut in, earning him a surprised look from James.

“Yeah, basketball courts” James repeated, seemingly surprised at Gilles’ suggestion.

“I think he means greener places to play” their father added, the smile on his face seeming to imply that he didn’t mind having to step in as moderator between his two sons so early in the morning. The brief pause in the discussion allowing Gilles to slowly begin eating the now syrup cover pancakes that lay on his plate as well as pouring himself a glass of fruit juice.

“I hear that they’re able to play baseball, football, and soccer year-round down here” their father added, a suggestion to which James raised an eyebrow.

“But Gilles hates soccer and football” he almost whispered as his father took another mouthful of tea before refilling it from the white kettle in the center of the table.

‘I don’t hate them; I just don’t obsess over them’ being Gilles’ own thoughts on the matter before he chimed in.

“They all might be easier to play when there isn’t the threat of the ground freezing over three months out of the year” he almost hummed out before taking another bit of his breakfast. While this squabbling over athletic preferences might seem like a simple discussion over athletic preferences, one glance at the two boys would give a hint as to why they preferred what they did. Despite being twins Gilles and James Tremblay were physical opposites; Gilles was roughly 5’2, had deep brown skin, and curly black

hair, a look that made him the spitting image of his father. By contrast James had light tan skin, dirty blond hair, and stood at 5'6, sharing far more with his mother, making it easy to see which one of the two was the more eager one to continue playing basketball. As well as who ate more, a fact slightly affirmed as James took another couple of pancakes and syrup before wolfing down another helping, while Gilles paused to drink some juice.

“Either way, the two of you should get going” their father began, bridging the gap in their conversation and prompting Gilles to turn his gaze towards the stove clock.

‘9:45’ running through his mind as he nodded slightly, surprised at all the time which had passed.

“Otherwise, you might not make it to the park before the heat of the day” their father added, leading James to take one long gulp of his own cup of juice.

“Dad’s right Gilles, come on!” James boldly declared, hopping down from his seat and scurrying over towards the front door to put his shoes on, leaving Gilles to look towards his father.

“Take care Gilles” he calmly said, a request Gilles answered with a nod before leaving the table and heading to the door to put on his own shoes. Closing the front door of their living room, which was bare of any furniture, pictures, just as.

“And both you boys have fun” drifted out from the kitchen.

Chapter 2

There are many words that can be used to describe the overall design of Fisher's Landing Park, simple, flat, or unimaginative, being only a few; but as Gilles stood on the uneven asphalt of the park's tiny basketball court another word came to mind.

'Beautiful' running through his head as he ran his gaze over the large green pain in front of him.

"Hey Gilles, heads up!" snapping the boy from his thoughts just before he felt a large, circular object hit his chest, causing him to glance down and see his brother's worn-out basketball resting in his hands,

"You've got to stay alert when it come to the ball bouncing off the rim," James said as he ran up an plucked the ball from Gilles' grasp, the stripped cover of the ball sliding out from between his hands, before adding.

"Wouldn't want to get hit in the head again" as he turned and took another shot, the ball sailing through the air before bouncing off the rim of the basket with a dull ringing sound. Just as the episode in question, a scene with had come in the earlier, and as far as Gilles' intended last, basketball season that the two brothers had played together.

‘Yeah, I wouldn’t want a bloody nose again’ going through Gilles head as he moved a little farther away from the basketball hoop and turned back to examine the long concrete path that they had come down. While the park lay only a couple dozen yards away from the boys’ new house, the journey there had taken over fifteen minutes due to the boys having yet to memorize the whole layout of the neighborhood. However, in the end the two had managed to reach the park before lunchtime, despite James’ having made it clear that he thought their pace would prevent them from doing just that.

“Hey Gilles, what are you looking at?” coming from behind Gilles just before the ring of the basketball hoop’s chain reached the boy’s ears, his gaze still focused on the various paths to the park.

“Just seeing if anyone is coming” being the answer the boy gave before he reached down and looked at the plastic watch that his father had given him two years ago, the electronic numbers 10:10 flashing on the grey background.

‘It’s a Saturday, where is everybody?’ coming just before a faint from the distance tickled his ear and Gilles turned to see a group of figures who looked to be youths walking towards him. A lot of them wearing hats, some of them carrying bats, and one or two them looking as though they were carrying what looked like bags. The sight causing Gilles’ spirit to rise slightly, something that must have been visible on his face, just as James looked in his direction, sending his brother’s gaze off towards the group that was approaching them.

“Hey Gilles, looks like you got your wish” coming from James just before he returned his gaze towards the basketball court and proceeded to return to shooting hoops. While Gilles’ gaze remained fixed on the group of individuals, now appearing to be seven, as they began setting up a series of objects in an odd shape.

“Uh James, would you mind if I went over and asked-” Gilles began, only for his question to be cut off by the sound of a ball hitting chain-link and a few bounces.

'I guess not' running through his mind as he glanced back and, seeing James busy occupying himself, proceeded to turn and ran over to the individuals. The seven vague individuals grew clearer as Gilles got closer until he noticed three things about them, first, they were boys, second, it looked like they were setting up bases, and third, most importantly, they all looked to be around his age.

'Perhaps things won't be so boring after all' running through Gilles' head as he reached the group just in time to hear one of them, the third shortest one with pale skin and a head of sandy hair, state.

"I think we should have a full-time catcher to make the teams even," his suggestion causing the boy opposite to him, the shortest boy who boasted deep brown skin and a large curly, black afro, to answer.

"But that means someone's not going to bat, and fielding without batting is boring," causing his counterpart to shrug his shoulders.

"Do you have a better idea, Anthony? It's not like someone's just going to-" he began, stopping mid-sentence when his gaze fell upon Gilles. The reaction causing the young Quebecois to look around in confusion, unsure as to the cause of the boy's sudden silence, a change that also surprised the shorter boy.

"What's the problem Carson? Why would you-" coming from the boy before he too turned and proceeded to go silent at the sight of Gilles, the second reaction doing nothing to ease his concerns about the first.

"Uh, hello" Gilles almost whispered, trying to not look at either of the two boys who were gaping at him.

"I saw you walk over onto the park and was wondering if" he continued or tried to continue before the smaller of the two boys ran over to him, a large smile on his face.

"See Carson! See! Now we can play a proper game" enthusiastically coming from him before he reached Gilles.

“That’s if he wants to play, Anthony” the other boy, Carson, suggested, causing Anthony to eagerly grab Gilles’ right hand.

“But you’d want to help us out, right? Right?” Anthony eagerly asked, causing Gilles to lean his head backward slightly.

“Uh, sure” coming from the boy with a lack of assurance that Anthony seemed to ignore as he turned towards Carson and, in a triumphant voice proclaimed.

“Well, let’s get divided!” the odd declaration causing Gilles to somehow become more confused while Carson could only shake his head and let out a sigh, as if he didn’t look forwards to clarifying what his friend’s saying meant.

“By the way, you said your name was Gilles, correct?” Carson asked, snapping Gilles back to reality before stammering out.

“Y-y-yes.”

“Good, I’m Carson, and the boy grabbing onto you is Anthony,” Carson began, causing Gilles to glance to his left and see Anthony beam at the announcement of his name.

“Yeah, and you’re going to be on my team!” he announced, before pulling Gilles away towards one side of the set of grouped items, which looked to be in the shape of a diamond. An act which Gilles could have sworn caused Carson to mutter.

“Oh boy” as he left, doing little to ease Gilles’ confusion.

“So have you played whiffle ball before?” Anthony asked, snapping Gilles’ attention back to the smaller boy and answering.

“Uh no, we don’t get much chance to play pick-up ball in Quebec, cause of the weather.,” earning him an almost mournful shake of the head from Anthony.

“That sucks, bet you guys don’t play much football either.” just as he turned and began to dig through a large black bag.

“Actually, that’s not true,” instinctually flying from Gilles, as he raised his left hand and continued.

“We’ve actually got a lot of football in Quebec; I think our secondary school leagues are like yours and our colleges-” until he was cut off by Anthony spinning around and holding out two large mitts.

“So, are you right-handed or left-handed?” cutting Gilles off as the boy shaking either mitt based on the dominant hand he referred to and earning a natural reply.

“Right-handed” from Gilles as Anthony tossed him a glove with a smile.

“But what will I need this for anyway?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” being Anthony’s answer.

“You’ll play first based on my team,” coming just before he tossed the glove in his right hand to Gilles while the left one went back to his bag.

‘Aren’t you a little overly sure of that?’ being the only response Gilles could muster as Anthony ran off towards some of the other boys who had gathered. Sure enough, however, no more than five minutes later Gilles found himself standing behind first base, or the orange cone that was supposed to be first base. Looking diagonally across the field to see Anthony on the opposite end of the field, another boy named Mutende on makeshift pitcher’s mound, and boy named Ethan crouching behind the plate with a glove of his own and his hat turned backwards. His deep brown hair covering his face and almost making it impossible to see the brown freckles that covered his cheeks.

“How did I end up here?” flowing from Gilles’ mouth in a whisper only audible to himself as he heard James’ basketball bounce off the rim of the basketball hoop.

“Alright, Mutende, nice and easy, nice and easy” coming from Ethan, the call receiving a nod from Mutende before he stepped forwards and delivered the ball to the batter, a short boy with orange hair and brown eyes, in one easy motion. Sending the plastic ball gliding through the air and floating towards the batter, who swung and sent the ball diagonally behind him.

“Alright Kyle, you almost had it” coming from the boys who were lined up by the bags while another proceeded to return the whiffle ball to Mutende, who repeated his motion. The ball this time being sent directly into the air along to the left side of the field, causing Anthony to jog in slightly before opening his hands and catching the ball like one would a piece of fruit that had fallen from a tree. The achievement earned him a round of cheers of approval from all members on the field as he tossed the ball back to Mutende. Who was less fortunate than Anthony, as a slight flick of the wrist by Anthony caused the lightweight ball to curve away from Mutende just as he reached for it, sending it past him and towards Gilles.

“I got it” coming from the boy as he picked the ball up and tossed it into the air twice, with interest.

‘It’s so light I think I might miss handle it’ crossing his mind as he tossed the ball to the lanky, dark-skinned boy, who, having caught the ball, returned to his place, and repeated the simple motion again. The batter swinging and, this time, managing to make better contact than his predecessor, sending the ball on a line drive over towards where Anthony was. Forcing the diminutive boy to sprint forwards from his position, pick up the ball, and throw the ball all in one motion, the sight of which caused Gilles to defensively step to his right.

‘I got it’ running through his mind as he moved, his eyes tracking the ball.

‘I got it!’ coming just before he felt his right footstep on something, causing him to stumble, before falling, still reaching out all the same, and ending up flat on his stomach with the borrowed glove just barely on the tip of his left hand.

'I think, I got it' coming just as he heard soft footsteps on the smooth grass.

"Is he out?" reaching his ears, causing him to prop his head up and look behind to get a vague view of his feet being near the cone.

"I mean he technically has the ball" came another voice, this time from Anthony before the runner walked towards him and bopped him on the back of the head and almost shouted.

"He wouldn't 'technically have the ball' I you hadn't put that spin on it when you threw!"

"Sorry, I can't help it, the baseballs I throw don't curve when I throw them like that" coming from Anthony, earning him another tap on the back of the head. The almost cartoonish argument between the two boys, and a glance towards his glove revealing that he'd caught the ball, causing a smile to come over Gilles' face and a chuckle to form on his lips.

"You don't need to be a physicist to know that baseballs weigh more than whiffle balls, so you can't throw them the same!" causing Gilles' chuckle to become a light laugh that stopped the argument between the two boys just as Gilles rose from his spot on the ground and wiped the grass off his shirt.

'If their games are always this exciting, I might want to play with them more often' crossing his mind as he tossed the ball back to Mutende and cried out.

"I got it! That's an out, right?" earning him a smile from Anthony and a neutral nod from Mutende.

"Darn right it is, now just one more and we get to bat" coming from Anthony as the rest of the boys returned to their places, leaving Gilles with one thought.

'Wait, we have to bat too?'

A few hours later, when the sun had begun its descent from its highest point in the sky and had already ushered in the onset of the afternoon heat, Gilles found himself walking back home. His dirty, out of breath, grass-stained form slouching over as he walked beside James as he walked home. His own frame standing in contrast to his brother's confident, upright one, with James' skin covered in a thin layer of sweat as opposed to Gilles' grass-covered body.

"Looks like they worked you pretty hard" James said nonchalantly, his attention entirely directed towards the basketball that he was spinning on his right pointer finger.

"Yeah...I guess they did" coming out from Gilles in a whisper as he placed his left hand over his left side before leaning back and trying to take a deep breath, the act causing a faint wheezing sound to be emitted from his throat.

"You know, if you'd told them that you had asthma, they wouldn't have had you do so much" James added to which Gilles could only let out a weak laugh.

"I know, I almost thought it wasn't going to kick in" Gilles began, a smile covering his face before he gestured to his chest and added.

"But look at what happened."

"By the way, I heard them invite you to play on Sunday" James began, turning his attention towards Gilles and dropping the ball to the concrete to begin bouncing it normally.

"Are you going to do it?" coming just before he crossed the ball between his legs.

'Show off' running through Gilles mind before he pounded his chest and took a breath that was slightly less wheezy than the earlier one, before answering.

"I said no, but I told them I could come by this upcoming Friday," earning him a smile from James.

“Then dad can help you get some stuff before then” coming from the boy, just as Gilles looked up towards the clear blue sky and added.

“Yeah, I guess we could.”

Chapter 3

The rest of the weekend flew by swiftly, with the only significant thing being the family attending Church the next day, and before Gilles knew it, he found himself was sitting in the back seat of the family’s black Toyota as it cruised down one of the local roads. His gaze alternating between his own passenger door window and the window of the seat next to his as he watched the various, multi-colored houses go by, before his eyes caught sight of a large drug store on his right.

“Hey dad, I saw the distance between our house and the store, it wasn’t that far, you didn’t have to come” Gilles stated just as he looked up and caught sight of his father glancing sideways to where his phone was placed on the dashboard.

“That’s okay Gilles,” his father began, returning his gaze to the stop light over the intersection and pushed the accelerator.

“I’ve been needing to see more of the neighborhood anyways” coming from the man before he took a right, left the intersection, and pulled into a small parking lot that had been set aside for a nearby strip mall. The car’s coming to a stop and the engine falling silent, just as Gilles leaned to his left and peered through the car’s front window to see the vaguely lit interior of a store and the words, “McCormik Athletic Company” above the entrance.

“Are you sure this place is open?” coming from Gilles as he stepped out of the car.

“It should, the website said the store doesn’t close until 5 pm” his father replied before closing his door and approaching the store. Reaching the building’s entrance, taking another glance at his phone, and then returning his gaze back to the store’s entrance before he grabbed one of the handles on the door and flung it open.

“See, all open” coming just before Gilles watched his father enter the store, the boy raising an eyebrow before he approached the front door and, after glancing through the windows again, pulled the door open. The now open doors revealing that the interior of the building wasn’t poorly lit, but that there was shade on the front windows, the exposed light temporarily blinding him upon his first entry. Instinctively closing his eyes and shrinking slightly from the bright light, just as a friendly call of.

“Welcome in” reached his ears, directing his gaze to the left and see a middle-aged man of moderate height dressed in a Carolina blue polo shirt, with brown hair called as he glanced up from the screen in front of him.

“O-oh, hello” being the almost whispered reply Gilles gave before looking around for his father and, upon catching sight of his father, scurrying over towards the right side of the small box store. The previous Saturday’s conversation that got him and his father into the store running through his mind as he went.

“So, did you boys enjoy your time at the park?” his father had asked when the two of them had arrived home, the question causing a smile to come over James’ face, just as he stopped bouncing his basketball.

“Oh yead, we had a blast” coming before James’ tossed the ball onto a nearby chair and added.

“Especially Gilles, he met some new friends,” an announcement that caused the sound of a chair being pushed back to meet Gilles’ ears before the sound of footsteps, and then the sight of his father peeking around the corner greeted his gaze.

“You did?” coming from him, a slight smile on his face. It was no secret in the family that between the two brothers, James was far better at socializing with peers of his own age. A fact that managed to make it so that James was able to become popular in every one of his sports teams, while Gilles, far less sociable, found it difficult to do the same. Meaning that even the slightest hint of his being to get a head start on connecting into his new community, was at least worth noting.

“Yeah, I did, I helped them even out their baseball ball teams” Gilles answered before he tried to brush off some of the grass which had managed to cling onto him despite the return journey from the park.

“I agreed that I’d play with them next Friday” he added, before pausing to take his shoes off.

“I see, well I should be able to take you to get some stuff on Monday” casually coming from Gilles’ father, earning him an answer of.

“Yeah, that would be great” from Gilles, along with a nod.

“You just need to promise me one thing Gilles” his father added, raising up a single pointer finger on his right hand before definitively declaring.

“You have to promise me that no matter what happens, you’ll never quit” the requirement earning a pause from Gilles before he nodded his head again and gave a firm.

“Sure, I promise,” before his father began discussing options for dinner, the impact of the words leaving his mouth not fully hitting him until a few minutes later.

‘And that’s how we ended up here’ running across Gilles’ mind as he reached his father and looked at the various fielding mitts, batting helmets, batting helmet visors, catcher’s helmets, and batting gloves. Each item being arranged based on its size and color, as well as being split between baseball and softball. However, Gilles’ paid little attention to the full array of items in stock as his eyes instantly drifted upwards upon catching a faint glimpse of blue, gluing his attention to the third rack from the top shelf.

“Hey Gilles, this looks like it would fit” his father called as he reached up and plucked a black baseball helmet from one of the middle racks on the left, before spinning and placing it on Gilles’ head. The sudden enclosing of his head in a tight space caused the boy to perk up slightly, as he felt the tops of his ears fold down against the interior foam.

“Uh, dad, I think it’s a little...little” Gilles’ replied, his answer vibrating throughout his head as he felt his ears increase in temperature, making him pleased when his father agreed and grabbed another helmet from the rack. Turning around and helping Gilles remove the tight piece of headgear from his head, before gently handing him another one, this one being a bright fire engine red color and one that Gilles took with a bit of care before placing on his head.

“This one’s close” he began, before shaking his head side to side and, upon the helmet bobbling around slightly, added.

“Just a little too big.”

“Hmm, well that’s weird” his father replied, removing the helmet from Gilles’ head, far easier than in comparison with the first helmet, before returning it to one of the racks.

“I was sure that would-.”

“You’ll want to leave a bit growth room” a voice called, sending Gilles spinning around and catch sight of a figure just the boy finished.

“That way you can grow into it or wear a hat for your first few years”, seeming to ignore the attention Gilles had given him at first before turning towards the young Quebecois, and giving a laid back.

“Oh, hey.”

“Hey,” being all Gilles could tell with an unsure pause.

“Ethan, Ethan McCormik, my dad own’s this store” being the boy’s answer, before he gestured towards Gilles.

“O-oh, I’m Gilles Tremblay, and this is my father” coming from the boy in a stutter before he gestured back towards, just as his father moved towards him, accidentally causing the new helmet to be knocked out of the man’s hands. Sending the blue colored piece of headgear onto the store’s floor with an audible thud, bouncing once before eventually rolling to Ethan’s feet.

“Sorry, about that” Mr. Tremblay said with a soft chuckle, as Ethan picked up the helmet.

“It’s okay, if it can’t survive falling on a carpeted floor, then it probably shouldn’t be on the head of a customer” being the boy’s calm reply, causing Gilles to raise his eyebrows in surprise.

“Customer? Do you own this place?”

“No, but my dad does,” Ethan replied, a cheeky grin sliding onto his face at his own word play, before continuing.

“He opened it after he moved here from Kirkland”.

“Kirkland? What’s Kirkland?” Gilles asked, the words flying from his mouth before he could think of a better way to cloak his general ignorance in the geography of the Pacific Northwest.

“It’s a suburb of Seattle, most of my family lives there” Ethan answered, earning him a slow nod from Gilles.

“How do you know so much about helmets and stuff?” being Gilles’ next question, to which Ethan shrugged.

“That’s what happens when your dad coaches a baseball team” being he was willing to say.

“So, is there anything else?” coming just as Gilles’ father pulled a small piece of paper from his pocket and began to read down the list.

“Nothing much, just a pair of cleats and a mitt.”

“That’s simple, the mitts are over there” Ethan began, pointing directly to Gilles’ left and exposing the boy to a wide array of large glove like pieces of gear. The lot of which came in what could only be described as an abundance of sizes and colors that ranged from the normal looking brown to the more unusual red.

“While cleats are at the back of the store with the other sports shoes” he added, pointing to his left while Gilles’ attention remained on the wide selection of mitts.

“Well thank you for the help, Ethan” coming from Gilles’ father, before the two of them moved on.

“So, his name’s Ethan and his dad runs a sports store? Cool!” Those were the first words that James had said when he’d learned of the result of Gilles’ trip to the sports store. The information hadn’t come the Monday that he and his father had initially bought the glove, helmet, and cleats, but

rather a few days later. When the two sat watching a collegiate baseball game between the University of Portland Pilots and the University of Gonzaga Bulldogs. The comment by James came just as the two teams started the fourth inning, with Gonzaga batting, and the game tied at one.

“Yeah, he seemed to have the whole place memorized” coming from Gilles, just as he paused from eating the small slice of Tourtière meat pie, from his plate.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he had the whole front and back of the store as well as every closet in the place memorized” James’ stated right before placing a forkful of his own piece of pie in his mouth as Gilles asked.

“So, how’s your search for a basketball league going?” earning him a frustrated grunt from his brother.

“Hard, almost all of the leagues are difficult to get into” James began, irritation becoming visible on his face just as he swished the fork in his mouth from side to side, his irritation earning him an odd look from Gilles.

“How hard can it be to sign up for a basketball league? Are they prestigious and exclusive?”

“More like prestigious and expensive” James muttered, glancing off towards the side as he did so and causing Gilles to miss the distinct crack of the bat, turning around just in time to see the ball sail over the center field fence for a home run.

“Don’t worry things should pan out” coming from the boy as he watched the batter, a man of impressive height and muscular build, circle around the bases before touching home plate.

“By the way Gilles,” James began, tone already showing his preference to move on from the subject.

“Do you think mom will be able to come to any of my matches?” the question moving Gilles’ attention back towards his brother. Despite how it might have sounded their mother’s absence from most of their family gatherings, especially James’ basketball matches, was far from malicious or planned. It was more so the result of her job flying across the world in an important, yet often difficult, position as a cargo pilot. A job that gave her the ability to travel the world delivering goods to those in need, at a generous salary, but came with the price of depriving her of the joys and consistency of a normal 9-to-5 job.

“I don’t know,” Gilles honestly answered, ignoring another sound of the bat cracking against something.

“Maybe if we get a schedule early enough, she can make the necessary bids to get some time off” he added, sliding over to his brother, and throwing an arm around him.

“Besides if you play even half as well here as you did back in Quebec, she’ll have plenty of time to come to a match” he finished, his response earning him a muted smile from James, since his success hadn’t raised their mother’s attendance in the past.

“Yeah, probably” coming before the two of them returned their gaze back to the TV screen, just in time to see the Lumberjacks turn a double play with the ball going from their pitcher, second baseman, to their first baseman to end the inning.

Chapter 4

Despite how much Gilles wanted to forget the less pleasant aspects of his conversation with his brother the previous night, he still found some of the questions replaying in his mind the following afternoon. Their first resurfacing in his mind went from being only at the occasional dull moment of the day to consistent, and almost repetitive, as he sat in the rear seat of his father's black Toyota as it made its way to the field.

'She will come if he plays long enough, right?' staying in his head no matter how many times he thought yes. The near repetition of the question on loop taking up all his intention, leaving him entirely unaware of anything that James was doing, that was until Gilles felt a sudden jab his side that caused him to shoot straight up in his sight.

"Well, we're here" thankfully reaching his ears and breaking him out of this mental repetition, just in time to glance out his passenger window and catch sight of a large parking lot. Past which first lay a modestly sized play structure and, a little further away, a pair of fields with chain link fences.

"I thought you said you met these kids in a park" coming from Gilles' father just as the boy climbed out from the vehicle, his newly purchased gear either on his feet or slung under his arm.

"We did," coming from James as a surprised, breathless, reply as he glanced at the two fields, catching sight of a dozen figures moving around on the right field.

"I don't get why the directions led us here," coming from James in a voice that was barely above a whisper that was only interrupted by the sound of the driver's side door closing and footsteps coming around the car.

“Well, maybe we’re at the wrong place,” Gilles’ suggested, his suggestion causing him to tighten his grip on his seat belt and silently look around the moderately sized gravel parking lot that car was parked in. Only relaxing slightly when he heard a seat belt unclicking, one of the car’s doors opening, and his father stated in his usual, calm voice.

“If so, we can get some directions and move along.”

The suggestion caused James to imitate his father, while Gilles sat and waited until both his father and his brother were in his immediate field of vision before he grabbed his baseball bag and got out of the car. The relative silence of the parking lot only being broken up by the sound of James’ bouncing his basketball on the gravel of the parking lot as he looked around.

“I guess you won’t be able to practice” Gilles meekly whispered before James tossed the basketball up into the air, caught it, and began to spin it on his right pointer finger. His gaze still locked on the empty parking lot around them.

“Nah, I just won’t be able to do shooting practice, but I can still do footwork and dribbling drills on my own” confidently coming from James as he finally turned his gaze to Gilles, before adding.

“Though it’s still kind of weird” As all three of them crossing the distance from the parking lot to the practice fields with speed and Gilles finding himself standing next to the field’s backstop, the earlier “half dozen figures” now being visible as eight kids and two adults. One of whom, a small boy dressed in a navy-blue shirt, a pair of black pants, with a noticeably large black afro, began emphatically jumping up and down upon seeing Gilles. The boys only stared a few seconds at Gilles before the tiny boy sprinted over to him, practically throwing himself against the chain link of the backstop and letting out an emphatic.

“Gilles! You came!” before rattling the fence.

“Oh, hi Anthony” mildly coming from Gilles, earning them Gilles, James, and their father’s attention and the question.

“Did you bring another player?” being the next question which came from small afro-haired boy as excited grin came over his face and a twinkle appeared in his eyes.

“Sorry, I don’t do baseball,” James answered with a smile, the words sending Anthony’s attention over towards Gilles’ brother and earning the trio a confused look and a question of.

“So, what do you play then?”, a question which James answered with one cheeky word.

“Guess”.

“Football”, instantly coming from the boy and causing James’ smile to disappear.

“No, it’s a sport where I can use my height” James replied, placing his hand on his head before sliding it over Gilles’ head to show the two inches in height difference that stood between the boys. Confident that this hint would be more than enough to give the answer away, an assumption that he quickly found to be wrong thanks to Anthony’s next guess.

“Volleyball!”. The word causing James to do a stiffen up as though he was having a heart attack as he did a double take that came with a wheezy.

“No”, as he shifted all his weight onto Gilles, who was barely able to prevent his brother from collapsing thanks to the lack of any sort of warning.

“Well, what do you play then?” coming from an irritated Anthony before James weakly raised his basketball up and wheezed out.

“Basketball”, his reaction made worse by Anthony's response.

“Well, why didn’t you say that earlier? Or at least give me a hint”, which caused James to lean onto Gilles even more, much to Gilles’ misfortune. The series of rapid shocks to James’ system only being interrupted by a call of.

“Gilles, do you know this boy?” from their father as he thankfully picked up a somewhat less shell-shocked James.

“Yeah, he’s with the kids I met last Saturday at the park” Gilles replied, rolling shoulders before briefly looking towards his dad before looking back towards the field.

“But this wasn’t it” coming just as Anthony threw his arms open and declared.

“That’s because that was First Place Park, but you are now at Bagley Fields!” the declaration sending Gilles looking around again, this time catching sight of the banner that was placed above the outside of the field’s backstop proclaiming, “Welcome to Bagley Fields, Home of the Lewis & Clark Little League.” If Anthony was hoping that the last-minute announcement, as well as a maintained banner and baseball fields would impress Gilles, he was rather mistaken. Instead of the smile, or other of approval, Anthony might have been expecting, Gilles’ look of confusion instead turned into a frown that sent Anthony sputtering.

“W-what’s wrong?” the normally energetic boy asked, a look of surprise and confusion that hadn’t seemed possible a few seconds earlier, blanketing his face.

“You lied to me!” being the only answer Gilles gave, the tone of the accusation doing more than any physical reaction could.

“What?” being the surprised cry the came from Anthony’s throat.

“You lied to me!” being Gilles’ reply, this time more pointed than before, as Anthony threw his hands up casually and donned a nervous smile, as though this action alone would be enough to get Gilles to take back his accusation.

“Oh, come on Gilles, we didn’t-” he began, only to be cut off by another distinct voice asking.

“WE?” and forcing Anthony to rephrase his statement.

“I didn’t mean any harm by it, we needed another player, and you didn’t seem like you were doing something else, and you really weren’t that bad, so we just thought we’d ask you to come and join us.”

“If that was the case then why not tell me the truth?” being the voice which naturally came from Gilles, the question causing Anthony to look down and meekly begin scratching the back of his neck.

“Well~, our league isn’t exactly known for being....” He began pausing and allowing Gilles’ father to cut in with a definitive.

“Good,” that caused Anthony to shake his head before finishing.

“So, we weren’t sure you’d want to join us,” the reply coming before a brief pause that allowed Gilles to look up and survey the field and notice that beside Antony the other seven boys and two coaches seemed absorbed with their own business.

“Well, Gilles, while I don’t agree with your friend’s methods, I do believe he has a point” Gilles’ father began, breaking the silence and earning him the attention of the two boys.

“Besides, you and James’ needed to get into the local community, here’s your chance” coming before the man turned to Anthony and added.

“But next time you want my son to do something, I **strongly** advise you tell him the truth” coming in a tone that left no room for discussion with a look that pierced the boy to his core.

“Understand?” coming from the man and earning him an affirmative nod from Anthony, before he turned to Gilles.

“Gilles, you go run out there and play with those boys, I’ll speak with their coaches” coming in a similar tone that prompted an automatic nod from Gilles before he entered onto the field from a nearby side entrance. Jogging towards the group of boys with Anthony while his father followed behind them a few steps before breaking off to speak with the two adults, with Anthony still a bit shaken about the encounter, despite how much he tried to avoid showing it by giving an especially loud.

“Hey everyone, look who showed up!” upon their arrival at the small group of players practicing, earning the two of them the attention of all but two of the boys.

“So, this is the guy you were talking about?” coming from the tallest boy who boasted a head of muffin brown hair and seemed to be chewing a piece of bubble gum as he lazily reared back and threw a ball to a boy across from him, who caught it despite looking towards Gilles.

“Yeah Jaren, that’s him, Gilles, our newest-” Anthony began, only to be cut off by another boy to the right of Jaren, boasting a head of straight black hair and glasses, added.

“I hope, he’s more athletic than he looks,” causing what little pride that Gilles had felt building in him at the thought of having received good rumors about his abilities, suddenly disintegrated at the second boy’s words.

“Oh, come on Taylor, at least let him settle in before you give him your usual treatment” coming from the recognizable figure of Carson, his suggestion being answered by a shrug by Taylor.

‘If that’s his usual treatment, I don’t want to see him when he’s upset’ running through Gilles’ thoughts just before he received a firm slap on the back that caused him to stumble a few steps forwards.

“Anyway,” coming from Anthony as he walked past him and added.

“I’ll grab a ball; you go over onto the line next to Carson” as he went by. A suggestion that Gilles duly followed, and within less than a minute he found himself standing next to Carson and across from Anthony, with the second young man holding a white ball in his right hand. Anthony tossing the ball into

the air twice before stepping forwards and gunning the ball to Gilles, the speed of the ball giving him no time to do anything except quickly raise his mitt for a loud thwack. That left Gilles' hand just as sore as it the sound made his ears ring slightly before tossing his mitt off of his hand in an almost knee jerk reaction.

“Holy crap Anthony, you're supposed to toss him the ball, not try to tear his hand off” coming from what sounded like an exasperated Carson, as Gilles began to rub his sore left hand. The stinging pain starting to tail off slightly and be replaced with a slightly more bearable numbness.

“It's not my fault he didn't break his mitt in before he came here” being Anthony's answer as he put his hands up in a carefree manner, just as Gilles took a moment to shake out his left hand before reaching down to pick his mitt from the grass.

‘And whose fault is that’ running through his mind as he gingerly slid the glove onto his left. Taking care to pick up the ball before reaching back and throwing the ball towards Anthony in what was a significantly weaker and slightly less on target throw, without any warning. Gilles' sudden movement giving his action away, but only supplying Anthony a few moments warning before the ball reached him. A warning that proved to just be enough for Anthony to get his mitt up to catch the ball, but not enough time to open it enough to catch it properly, causing the ball to make a light thudding sound as it hit the base of the mitt instead of the webbing like it was supposed to.

“Oh, trying to pay me back?” coming from the small boy, his smile growing wider.

“That might've worked, if the throw was on target” he added, casually tossing the ball up in the air again.

“Or quite a bit harder.” The half insult, half compliment, coming right before the boy delivered a strike of his own, one that Gilles was ready for this time, and adjusted accordingly to receive. The ball this time settling into the unbroken webbing of his mitt with a slightly softer thwack, before Gilles

returned the ball to Anthony. Their leisurely toss finally stabilizing and the distinct thwacking of their mitts developing into a reliable rhythm, the pain in Gilles' left hand slowly lessening as they went.

'Hey, I might just be getting the hand of-'

"Fall in!" breaking Gilles' train of thought just as he delivered his last throw, which Anthony caught before jogging away, being followed by everyone on his side of the throwing group, leaving Gilles in silent confusion.

"Don't worry," coming from Carson as he came up to Gilles and placed a friendly hand on Gilles' shoulder, earning him the Quebecois' attention.

"It just means that it's time to move onto the next drill."

"Ah, *fichu*, and I was just starting to get the hang of it too" coming out from Gilles in a whisper as he grimaced in frustration before joining the rest of the boys and moving to the two grown men who were standing at the field's pitcher's mound. Or what might have been the pitcher's mound had it been an actual mound, instead it was nothing more than a flat piece of earth with a circle around it and a white rectangle in the middle. Just as the "pitcher's mound" differed from those Gilles had seen on TV, the two men who stood on it differed from each other greatly. The taller, and younger of the two, boasted a head of light brown hair that looked to be graying slightly, green eyes, and a goatee, while his older counterpart had a head of greyish-black hair and a pair of blue eyes. However, despite their differences in height and age, one thing that was clear to Gilles was that the two men commanded similar amounts of respect. If anything, the shorter of the two men seemed to command a bit more, as he was the one that all the boys looked at first.

"Alright, boys, I've got some news" the older man began, his soft, laid-back tone not matching up with his straight face.

“This is a little spontaneous, and it won’t be made official until next week, we’ve got a brand-new player on our team today” he continued, Gilles’ ears picking up some of what he said before glancing over towards the field’s backstop to see his father standing and waving with what looked to be a smile on his face.

“I won’t point him out, you know who he is, but I expect you all to give him pointers during the drills whenever you can” he finished, pausing briefly to glance down at the small clip board he was holding. His diverted attention prevented him from seeing the way that all the players around him glancing backwards towards Gilles, while the boy slouched down slightly and looked to down to his right.

‘I wish he hadn’t said anything.’

“Anyways, we’ll be doing things normally today” the second man added, clearing his throat before doing so.

“We’ll break up into two groups, the first group” he continued before gesturing down what looked to be the middle of the group, causing the players to part, and leaving them with one group of five and another of four, and pointing to the four players to the right of Gilles.

“Will focus on batting, and the second” he continued, gesturing to Gilles’ group of five players.

“Will focus on fielding, we’ll take a break in forty minutes, take a break, and then swap,” finished the man’s instructions and earning him a round of nods from the whole team before they were dismissed. The other eight players once again scattering like ants to get the gear for their upcoming drill while Gilles’ couldn’t help but look around, slightly confused by the instructions, leaving him no choice but to do one thing.

“Excuse me?” he asked, having crossed the distance between himself and the two men, who’d each gone back to consulting their shared clipboard, earning him their attention.

“I don’t really know what’s going on, what do you want me to do?” meekly, coming from the boy and causing the two men to briefly glance at one another while the shorter of the two turned back to Gilles.

“Just try and fill in wherever there’s a vacancy on the field, and we’ll see where you end up” being his simple, and good natured, reply. The man’s face donning a smile as he did so, while the taller man proceeded to give an affirmative nod of sorts that left Gilles with little doubt as to the first man’s sincerity.

‘Okay, if they think it’s that simple then I’ll do it’ crossing Gilles’ thoughts as he nodded and replied with a respectful.

“*Oui, Messieurs,*” before he quickly jogged on a beeline towards the first base he saw, unaware of the confused looks that the two men were now giving each other; the beeline landing Gilles with Anthony and Carson at second base.

“What’re you doing here?” being the unwelcome greeting that awaited him.

“Well, your coaches said to fill in so I just-” he began, his reply earning him a gentle shove from a smiling Anthony.

“Fill in somewhere that needs someone, we’re full here,” coming as he did so, the remark causing Carson to tap the boy on the head with a mitt.

“What he means is, you should go somewhere competitive” Carson’s slightly more polite rephrasing of Anthony’s declaration, giving a slight hint before glancing over towards first base, where Ethan was standing.

“But there’s someone there too” Gilles protested, earning him a shrug from Carson who simply shrugged and answered.

“Better chance there than here” leaving Gilles with little choice but to sigh before jogging over to Ethan.

“Hey” coming from the boy, his attention still focused on the plate, where the shorter of the two men was standing next to a white bucket, a bat in his right hand and a ball in his left.

“Hey” being Gilles’ quiet reply, as he glanced around the infield, taking in the way Anthony, Carson, and another boy with black hair at third base were standing then returned his gaze to Ethan. Looking between the four boys a few more times, trying desperately to figure out what the four of them were doing, or what they planned to do. His confused looks earning him a look of confusion from Ethan, that only seemed to get worse as Gilles’ glances between the four sped up, especially as he caught sight of one of the men from earlier approaching the batter’s box with a white bucket and a metal bat.

“So, what are you guys doing?” in a quiet voice only partially hoping that his question was heard by the three boys around him. The question earning him a raised eyebrow from Ethan, as though he wasn’t exactly sure Gilles was asking the question he was asking, and sending Gilles’ gaze down to the infield dirt. Allowing Gilles’ to catch the sight of a realization coming across Ethan’s face, right before he answered.

“Simple, we’re throwing the ball around” just as there was a ring of the bat, the ball speeding down the third base line towards the other boy, who ran in and, fielding the ball with his mitt, proceeded to plant his feet before delivering a strike towards where Gilles and Ethan were standing. Causing Gilles to desperately jump out of the way, while Ethan calmly stepped forwards and caught the ball with relative ease before rolling it back towards where the coach at home plate was, before stepping away from the bag.

“Your turn” being the boy’s nonchalant warning before the coach at Homeplate yelled.

“Second!” before hitting a speedy groundball on the ground towards Carson, who moved before stepping and delivering the ball to first, instantly sending Gilles’ gaze over towards Ethan, and seeing that

the boy had only moved further away from the bag. The sight making Ethan's message clear and sending Gilles over the top of the base, putting his left foot back onto the white bag while stepping forward with his right, and reaching his left mitt out. The thwack of the ball in his mitt sending a jolt up his left arm as it was pulled away from his body, sending him tumbling down and into an awkward sitting position on his bottom, the ball still clutched in his mitt.

"Nice play, one" coming from the coach, before the man turned his attention back to second base and added.

"And Carson, try not to kill our newest arrival, okay?" just as Ethan walked up to Gilles and took the ball from his glove before rolling it towards Homeplate.

"And a word of advice," coming from the short, freckle faced boy, his words causing Gilles to snap his attention up from where he sat towards him.

"Stay alert on the field at all times," coming before the call of.

"Short" and a ring of the bat hitting the ball sent Gilles scurrying into the foul territory behind Ethan. Making it just as the sound of the ball hitting Ethan's glove registered in his ears, he found himself swapping places with Ethan again. The two of them swapping places after every ball that the coach put in play continuing for over the next half of an hour and garnering Gilles several spots of dirt on his unprotected knees. As he jumped, leaned, and dived once or twice to prevent the ball from getting by him and keeping true to the simple description that Ethan had given him of the position, until a water break brought an intermission to the practice.

"We catch the ball."

'Yeah, but does everyone have to make it so hard to catch it?' running through Gilles' mind, as he sat next to the chain link fence that lay was set up in front of the right-side dugout on the field. A water

bottle pressed to his lips, and the cool feeling of the life-giving liquid making its way down his throat, causing a small smile to cross his parched face.

“Well, you don’t you look bright” breaking the peaceful silence that surrounded Gilles and causing him to look up and see a head of orange hair and pair of green eyes in front of him.

“Though not a bright as your knees do” he added, referring to the noticeable amount of dirt that had gathered on Gilles’ legs.

“Kyle, right?” Gilles asked, earning him a nod from the boy before he pointed to his right, Gilles’ left, and asked.

“May I sit?” a request which Gilles answered by simply clearing the area next to him before he did as he’d asked.

“So, how’s your first practice?” being the boy’s next question, his tone sporting what sounded like a mixture of interest and slight concern.

“So far it’s been hot, tiring, and a bit troublesome” being the first words that seemed to spring out of Gilles’ mouth without any hesitation.

“But?” Kyle asked, leaning forwards as he did so.

“But it’s more fun than watching one of my brother’s basketball practices, and way more fun than sitting at home” Gilles added before taking another gulp of water, his words to cause the boy to relax slightly.

“That’s good,” coming as the boy leaned back, donned a large smile, and muttered.

“For a few weeks there, I was wondering if we’d have team at all this year,” earning him a confused look from Gilles.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, to put it lightly, our league does things...different” Kyle answered, looking up to the sky as he did so and causing Gilles’ to raise a confused eyebrow.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that our coaches focus on getting kids onto the field and less on winning...or being good” he began, waving his hand before going on.

“So, while there were lots of teams when I was six there aren’t as many now, in fact I think adding ours we have a grand total of seven this year” pausing briefly to look at Gilles before adding.

“That is as long as you stay, otherwise we’ll have six,” earning the boy an eye roll from Gilles as he looked back towards the other side of the field where the other seven players had gathered and begun conversing amongst themselves.

‘Geez, no pressure.’

“Well, unless things turn out to be fierce and competitive, I’ll probably stay” causing Kyle to sit straight up and begin gesturing wildly.

“Oh, no, it’s not fierce at all, which is probably why we do so poorly in competitions with other leagues, and you won’t have to worry about nepotism because Coach Lamar is really fair,” causing Gilles to snap his attention back to Kyle and ask.

“Nepotism?”

“Yeah, Coach Lamar” Kyle began, pointing at the shorter man who was now conversing with his assistant.

“Has two sons on the team,” he continued, before pointing towards the gathered group of seven boys.

“Ethan” pointing to the brown freckle faced boy who was facing them.

“And Jaren” he added, pointing to the noticeably taller, muffin brown haired boy whose back was facing them. The sight of the two boys causing Gilles’ eyes to widen slightly before he slowly moved his eyes to the upper left-hand corner of his vision, his face still aimed at the gathered group of boys.

“Does Coach Lamar own a sports utility store?” carefully coming from him before Kyle answered with an emphatic nod of his head.

“Yep,” causing a weird smile to cross Gilles’ face.

‘So, he was there when I bought all my stuff.’

“But you can find out more after we bat and while we practice tomorrow” coming right before the boy hopped up from his spot on the grass and ran towards his friends, leaving Gilles’ with a thought in his head as a whistle blew indicating their break was over.

‘Tomorrow?’

Chapter 5

Sure enough, Gilles found himself showing up to Bagley Fields the following Saturday at 1 in the afternoon going through the same drills as he had the previous day. Throwing, fielding hitting, and running, especially running, to keep up with his newfound teammates to the best of his abilities for two hours. Relishing every single fifteen-minute break offered between the thirty-minute drills and leaving little surprise that Gilles found himself resting all Sunday.

“So, they have you practice on Friday and Saturday of every week?” James’ asked, the “pinging” sound of the basketball hitting the asphalt slightly muffling his question.

“Yeah, apparently-” Gilles began, pausing briefly as his brother shot the ball off towards the basket, the orange sphere bouncing off the backboard and rolling back to James’ before he began again.

“Apparently that’s their schedule, but they said they were only going to practice once on Friday,” coming from him as James’ shot the ball again, the ball this time ricocheting off the rim and flying past James. Bouncing a few times before reaching where Gilles lay on a patch of grass that boarded the front side of the basketball court. His aching legs prevented him from doing more in his seated position than rolling onto his right slightly and reaching out and stopping the ball from going by him and into the street, before collecting it and tossing it back to James.

“By the way, maybe you should do more practice under the rim, you’ve never been good at taking those deep shots” Gilles added as he tossed his brother the ball, his suggestion earning him a firm shake of James’ head.

“No way, I need to get better at three pointers and deep two-point shots if I want to get onto a team,” being James’ firm answer, taking the ball and spinning it on his finger before adding.

“Besides, who’d want someone who only get rebounds and assists?”

‘I would,’ crossing Gilles’ mind as he crossed his arms and watched his brother try to take another shot that he predictably couldn’t make.

‘Well, at least all these shots are forcing him to practice his form’ coming as Gilles’ tried to find something positive from his brother’s predicament. Closing his eyes seconds before the predictable, and slightly rhythmic, sound of the ball ricocheting reached Gilles’ ears, causing a sigh to escape him as he rolled left and lay on his back. Unfortunately, Gilles’ wasn’t allotted much time to lay there in peace for a few minutes, and at least a dozen missed shots by James, later the sound of a car pulling up caused his peaceful trance to be over.

“Gilles, James, what are you two doing here?” coming just as Gilles opened his eyes and looked up, his gaze falling upon his father, the slight afternoon breeze causing the loose bits of his blue T-shirt and black slacks to flap slightly.

“Oh, hey dad, James was just shooting some hoops and I was-.”

“What about mom’s flight?” interrupting Gilles’ answer causing him to sit up suddenly and look towards James, one question on his lips.

“Mom’s flight?”

“Don’t worry,” being James’ answer, coupled with a dismissive wave as he placed his basketball under his right arm.

“You said her flight doesn’t come in until 4:30 and it’s...” he continued pausing to check his phone before suddenly falling silent.

“4:35,” being their father’s reply, answering for the now silenced boy, before adding.

“Come on, let’s go” and gesturing towards the car, the realization sending both Gilles and James scurrying into the vehicle, with both barely having enough time to fasten their seatbelts before the vehicle began to move. The sudden jerk of the car and brief onset of momentum causing both boys to be pressed into their seats as first as their father weaved through the various streets that snaked through their neighborhood.

“I’m sorry dad, I set an alarm on my phone and everything” James began, his words coming just as they reached the end of the main road and moved onto the highway.

“I don’t know why it didn’t go off; it should have-”

“It’s okay James, it’s okay” their father answered, his words coming as their car moved into the left lane before speeding down the freeway, sending multiple cars whizzing past Gilles’ right side passenger window as they went.

“How long is mom going to be home this time?” Gilles asked nonchalantly as he turned and leaned his head against the window, closing his eyes trying to return to the earlier state of serenity he’d inhabited.

“She’ll be home until Friday,” his father answered, the man pausing briefly before seeming to make the connection and adding.

“That should mean she’ll be able to see you off for your next baseball practice,” a statement which Gilles simply nodded his head to before trying to position his legs in a way that placed the minimal amount of stress on his muscles before James’ elbowed him slightly.

“Maybe that means she’ll make sure you bring your inhaler next time” James added, half-jokingly, and causing to roll his closed eyes.

“I only forgot it once” being his lone, muttered, response before letting out a slight yawn and rolling slightly towards the window. Intent on giving the illusion that he had fallen asleep even if he failed to achieve it. Luckily, the only thing that interfered with his goal was his still aching legs as, seeming to take the hint, James proceeded to direct his attention towards his father and the recent committee and training filled day he’d had at work. Making it so that Gilles’ attempt at rest wasn’t interrupted until after he felt the car make several right turns and slowdown, before coming to a distinct halt. The sound of the car’s trunk opening causing him to open his eyes and glance up from his seat to see a figure move past his window and open the front passenger door before climbing into the front seat.

“Hey, you two” coming just before Gilles was met with his mother’s beaming face, her black cargo pilot’s hat tipped slightly to the right and allowing her auburn hair to cascade down the front right half of her face.

“Hey mom!” being James’ enthusiastic answer before he reached forwards and tried to hug their mother as best as he could with the restrictions of his seat belt.

“Hi~” being the slightly less enthusiastic answer that came from Gilles, his greeting partly interrupted by a yawn that made his mother smile.

“I thought you two boys would have adjusted to Pacific Coast Time by now?” coming as their father climbed in the car, fastened his seatbelt, and signaled before easing the car forwards into oncoming traffic.

“We have, Gilles’ just tired from not sleeping too well last night since his legs were aching all of last night” casually coming from James, earning Gilles’ a concerned look from their mother.

“Why are your legs sore?”

“Because I did two laps around the ball field at practice yesterday” wearily coming from Gilles, causing their mother to turn towards their father, still confused by the situation.

“Why was Gilles at a ball field? I didn’t think there were any games over the weekend?” earning her a slight chuckle from their father, who could only shake his head.

“It’s the ball field that Gilles’ new team practiced at a few days ago, apparently the coaches had them do a lot of running to get in shape for the upcoming season” coming from the man as they began to speed down the freeway.

“When did he join a ball team?” naturally coming from their mother next, earning her a laugh from James while Gilles proceeded to throw his brother a glance.

“Do you want to tell her or should I?” Being the unspoken question that came from his eyes and sending James’ attention back towards their mother, the boy simplified the whole conversation with a simple.

“That’ a long story”

It was indeed a long story, however having had that said its length proved to be a blessing as by the time James was finished telling it, the family had long since returned home and unpacked their mother’s suitcase.

“Well, that’s quite the train of events Gilles” their mother stated while plopping down on the living room couch and tossing her pilot’s hat on a nearby chair.

‘Yeah, and it might be the least weird coincidence that I’ve run into since we moved here’ crossing Gilles’ mind as he shrugged his shoulders and went into the kitchen for a glass of juice.

“I guess that means you’ve settled in quite well” coming from her before she let out a brief laugh and smacking one of the cushions lightly.

“Not entirely” Gilles’ replied, his answer being slightly stifled by the orange juice as he raised his glass to lips and began to drink. Entering the living room just as his mother had unzipped her bag and begun energetically digging through its contents.

“By the way, I thought you two boys might like something from my last trip” coming just as she raised up to two tiny boxes, handing one to Gilles. The young boy made sure to carefully take the small, light, fire engine red box before gingerly opening it, bringing him face to face with a tiny, delicate, marionette figure.

“Surprise! I thought it would be a good make-up present for missing your last Carnival in Quebec because my flight from JFK got snowed in last February” coming from Gilles’ mother as he stood staring, absolutely transfixed by the little figurine.

“Wow, thanks mom” being the faint words the barely escaped his lips, his total focus on protecting the figure as he closed the box leaving him completely ignorant of the sound of footsteps thundering towards him.

“It’s crazy though, you’ve already got way more friends than you had back in Quebec” being the only warning from James before he gave Gilles a firm slap on the shoulder that caused him to nearly choke.

‘Well, I wouldn’t call all of them my friends, I don’t know them yet.’

“Yeah, I guess you’re sort of right” being all that Gilles answered, not particularly interested in getting into an argument with his brother over the specifics. Especially when the technicalities responsible for those specifics would no doubt soon change.

Chapter 6

It always took a few days for Gilles to adjust to his mother returning from one of her long-haul trips for TransGlobal Airfreight. The added person in need to use the shower, addition of someone who would swipe the family's snacks, and increase in loads of laundry that kept the washing going day was never a smooth transition for him. However, the addition of a second person who could be available to supply transportation to any of the family's functions always meant less of a burden for Gilles' father,

whenever his mother was at home. A luxury that made it so that he was able to make it to his most recent practice session, despite his father's schedule having become packing with various meetings for the upcoming school year.

“So, this is where they've got you working?” coming from his mother as he climbed out of the family's second, and far less used, car, a navy-blue Toyota.

“Reminds me of when I played baseball back in San Diego,” causing him to turn his attention towards her with an eyebrow raised, and briefly pause pulling out his newly purchased baseball bag.

“You played baseball?”

“Of course, I did, it costs less to get a bat and some balls than a basketball hoop and a ball” his mother answered, seeming to take a certain amount of joy in her son's surprise.

“Besides, with all your aunts and uncles we were able to form nearly a quarter of each team we were on,” she added, a look of nostalgia coming over her face before she added.

“Never got anywhere, but those were good times,” her words coming as Gilles withdrew his bag from the back of the car and closed the door.

“How long did you play?” coming as he did so.

“About 3 years, from when I was eight to when I was ten, but ever year was worth it” coming from her and earning Gilles a smile before adding.

“And I hope you have just as much fun” and climbing into the car and driving off, leaving Gilles alone to make his own way towards the field. Arriving, just as the rest of his team had begun their throwing practice, picking up a ball and effortlessly sliding into line next to them, his presence barely being mentioned by anyone until the team had been divided in two for fielding and batting practices.

“So, I heard you got a new bat” breaking this quiet lull that had developed, sending Gilles’ attention towards Carson.

“Where’d you hear that?” coming from him, Carson’s answer being to simply jerk his thumb towards the infield where Ethan was standing doing fielding practice, before looking back at Gilles.

“So, did you?” coming from Carson as he lightly elbowed Gilles in his left arm.

“Yeah, I did” being Gilles’ answer before he proceeded to unzip the top of his bag and pull out his brand-new bat. It’s distinct, unused smell hitting Gilles’ nostrils before the sight of the healthy blue BBCOR bat, two parallel white lines at the base, a black grip at its base, and the word “Whiplash” across it in white. The faint flash of the sun against the sleek, flawless metal of the bat seemed to get the attention of Carson, as the boy let out a long whistle before flatly saying.

“I can’t wait to bust that thing up” as Gilles held the bat out to reestablish his feeling of its weight and center of gravity.

“Alright boys, group up!” causing the four boys to form an oval, which Coach Pat dragged the team’s large, black, ball bucket to the center of, before asking.

“Okay, whose first?”

“Gilles should go first” coming from Kyle before Anthony added.

“Yeah, give him a chance to break in his new bat,” sending Coach Pat’s gaze over towards Carson, who simply shrugged, before he turned towards Gilles and grabbed a few whiffle balls.

“You ready?” coming just as he paused and proceeded to raise the white, hole filled, plastic ball up with his left hand, the sight of the ball causing Gilles to stand up as stiff as a tree trunk and raise his bat above his head. Gilles’ nod causing the man to squat down slightly before gently tossing the ball up into the air, much like Gilles had seen Mutende do the first time he’d met his soon to be teammates, sending the ball floating towards him. The sight causing him to lean back before stepping forwards and

swinging, only to miss the ball, leaving it to effortlessly float through the air past him and land softly on the grass. The sound of the ball's gentle landing causing Gilles to freeze, before moving his eyes to the right and then downwards, just barely catching sight of the multi-holed white sphere behind him.

"It's alright, the first one can be tricky, just adjust and move on" coming from Coach Pat in an encouraging voice. His words causing Gilles to nod his head before taking his batting stance and swinging again, and missing, then he swung again, and missed; until Coach Pat had tossed him a total of six balls. All of which had been missed by Gilles.

'What's wrong with me?' Thundering through Gilles' head like a freight train, the frustration increasing with the sound of every single ball that Carson, Kyle, and Anthony hit. The sound of each ball that his teammates hit causing him to subconsciously flinch, by flicking his head down slightly, but also causing him to attach his gaze onto them.

'Each one of them keep the bat at the opposite point of their center of gravity, where they can quickly bring it around and hit the ball' running thought his mind as he took in every single one of their movements and analyzing, each of the boys' movements from their legs to their waists, to their arms being imprinted in his silently steaming mind.

'Which means' he added, lowering the bat to about the height of his chest and widening the base of his feet slightly.

'Something like this should-.'

"Okay Gilles, back to you" breaking the boy from his trance like state to see Coach Pat once again facing him, the man's face boasting a knowing look before he asked.

"Did you study your teammates?" a question Gilles answered with an emphatic nod that seemed to the man to dawn a smile that said.

“Good,” before he squatted down and, without warning, softly tossed the ball towards Gilles. The sudden movement of the man causing Gilles to panic, moving out his stance wildly before swinging and making contact. Sending the whiffle ball down of into his inner, left thigh, and earning him a weak sting in his left leg as well as a slap on his right shoulder from Anthony.

“Alright kid, you’re almost there, steady your stance, swing with your middle” coming calmly from Coach Pat, before he demonstrated by stepping forwards, planting his foot on the ground, and turning to his left, reenacting what Gilles had seen Anthony, Carson, and Kyle do. His wise words softly coming just as a shout from another individual came roughly and randomly.

“Anthony! Don’t ever sneak up on someone with a bat above their waist!” coming just as Carson and Kyle raced over to the ecstatic afro-haired and dragged him away from the distracted boy, out of greater concern of breaking Gilles’ trance then keeping Anthony safe.

‘Steady stance, swinging middle,’ beginning to play in his mind like a poorly rendered sound bite. Gilles’ eyes glued to his coach’s hand as he gently proceeded to toss the ball towards him, waiting for approximately a full second before stepping forwards, cocking his arms back as he did so, and swinging. His bat again touched the ball and this time sending it forwards and towards the feet of Coach Pat, who hoped over the ball as it came his way.

“There you go!” coming with a large smile before he tossed another one and Gilles sent the ball into the ground again, this time going just to the right of Coach Pat. The rest of the pattern being followed as he managed to spray the ball around the Coach Pat and the bucket, managing to hit eleven of the eighteen balls thrown to him by the batting practice was over.

“Hey, we got a contact hitter here!” coming loudly from Anthony seconds before he ran past Gilles and delivered a firm slap on his back that caused the young Quebecois to stumble a bit.

“Got that right” and.

“No strike outs here,” also coming before Gilles felt two more firm slaps on the back before the figures of Carson and Kyle both went sprinting by.

‘Why couldn’t they have aimed for my head?’ crossing Gilles’ mind as he stood up straight and tried to stretch out the sound skin on his now slightly reddened back. Removing his helmet before rolling it on his back slightly to return some level of feeling by roiling it up and down his back. His feeling just began to return to it as he reached the pitcher’s mound, still rolling his shoulders as he took a knee on the grass of the infield. The dullness fading away in place of a faint stinging sensation that made Gilles move very gingerly throughout the whole of the following fielding practices, His back not losing its stinging feeling until after the end of practice, making the act of kneeling in the circle around the mound a little easier.

“Alright boys, tomorrow’s the big day, season opener” coming from Coach Lamar, earning him smiles across the whole of the group. Coach Pat walking past him and proceeded to hand out small, folded, pieces of paper to each of the boys as Coach Lamar continued with his speech.

“Our first game of the season will be at 10:45 am, we’re the away team, and we’ll be playing on field one” he began, his descriptions causing some of the boys to look to their left and look at the empty “visitors' dugout.”

“But the opening ceremonies are at 10:15, so be sure to be here no later than 10 for the ceremony on field two” coming just before a few of the boys looked over at the identical other field, their gaze being accompanied by an unsure look from Gilles. The rest of the boys who had not turned their attention towards either of the dugout still focused on the two coaches and gave an affirmative nod at the mention of the times arrival. Instead of joining his teammates’ gaze Gilles proceeded to look down at the piece of paper in his hands before unfolding it and silently reading over its contents.

‘Lewis & Clark Marlins, Columbia River Rockies, Lewis & Clark Astros, Lewis & Clark Oriels, Lewis & Clark Reds, echoing in his head as he reviewed the paper several times.

'Oh, this must be the schedule' finally registering in his mind, the realization not staying long as the statement of.

"But before we leave, we have an announcement" pulled him back to reality and send his line of sight shooting right back towards his coaches, both of whom had large smiles on their faces.

"Due to his late arrival, one of your teammates wasn't here when we did the initial uniform fitting" Coach Pat began, his words coming just as Coach Lamar reached behind him and revealed a cardboard box.

"So, after contacting his dad, we were able to get him his very own uniform and cap" coming just as Coach Lamar turned around and raised a basic looking navy-blue t-shirt with the words "Lewis & Clark Youth Baseball League" plastered on it in white print. The letters on the shirt placed above by a logo of a large white baseball in mid-flight as well as a navy-blue baseball cap with a large grey S that had a white baseball in its center that was cut into quarters by four points of a compass.

"It's official, welcome to the Lewis & Clark Mariners Gilles!" coming before around a clapping, and a few faint chuckles, were heard across the group, all while Gilles remained in humble silence.

'I get my own uniform?' being all that Gilles could think as he stood staring at the simple, yet appealing, uniform.

"What are you waiting for? Come one!" Once again snapping Gilles out of his trance and causing him to quickly run up and grab the uniform and hat.

"T-thanks," stumbling out from his mouth as he stared at the uniform.

"If my dad needs to pay you back I-."

"Don't worry about its kid" cutting him off just as Coach Lamar gave him a soft, yet firm, pat on the back.

“You’re on the team now, you don’t have anything to prove” coming from the man before Gilles walked back to his spot and plopping back down where he sat, both Anthony and Carson throwing an arm around him once he arrived.

“Welcome aboard man” being the only words that Gilles heard over the next few minutes, his gaze staying on the shirt and cap in hands for rest of the meeting, through the team chant, and all the way to the parking lot until the cry of.

“Gilles!” brought him back to reality and sent him scurrying to his father’s black Toyota.

“So, how was practice?” coming just as the car pulled away and Gilles returned his gaze back to his shirt.

“Great” being Gilles’ faint answer as he turned the shirt over, looked at the word “Bridgestone” on the back of shirt in black, surrounded by a white border.

“So, do you like your new uniform?” coming just as Gilles placed the Seattle Mariners cap on his head and he folded his shirt in his lap.

“Yeah, I do, thanks” being his almost breathless answer, his gaze going up and his gaze catching sight of his father’s smile in the rear-view mirror.

“Good, it should be the beginning of something interesting” coming just before their turned and left the parking lot.

Chapter 7

The following morning flew by for Gilles, with all the acts of waking up, eating breakfast, and leaving for the field all seeming to come together a large hurricane of events that left Gilles feeling helpless. Leaving him feeling as though he was a mere observer to all the things that went around him, only feeling the full realization that he was in his parents' Toyota, with his brother and both of his parents, and that he had indeed joined a baseball league, when the car went over a bump in the road. Shaking him around and causing his head to bump up against one of the padded headrests for the rear passengers' seats and snapping him out of his daze.

“Gilles, Gilles did you hear what I said?” coming from his left shortly afterwards and sending his attention towards James, who was looking at him with concern.

“Sorry, no” tumbling out of Gilles' mouth, and earning him a raised eyebrow from James, before the boy repeated.

“I was asking if you were nervous for your first game?” as though it was the first time he’d done so.

“You know, with errors, at bats, a scoreboard, all those other weird stats” coming as he reached into the pocket of his jacket and withdrew a small white booklet with a blue boundary titled “A beginner’s guide to baseball.” The sight of which prompted Gilles to reach out and grab the small booklet from James.

“Where’d you get this?” coming from him as he began to flip through the first few pages of the booklet.

“Oh that, dad got it for you while you were at practice” being James’ nonchalant answer, earning him Gilles’ attention, accompanied with a raised eyebrow.

“I was going to give it to you, but then I opened it and found these rules about the pitcher stopping and starting, then starting again and I found I couldn’t pass it on” he added, his vague description causing Gilles’ mouth to open slightly and crease his eyebrows as a look of confusion crept onto his face before he finally asked.

“You mean a balk?”

“Yeah, that, it didn’t make any sense, how can a pitcher ‘cheat’ when he tries to pick the runner off first base” coming from James before he crossed his arms and shaking his head slightly.

‘If the question was that easy to answer, I don’t think there’d be any controversy when it happened’ was Gilles’ mental reply, his mind going back to a game the previous evening when, during a game between the San Diego Padres and Los Angeles Angels, a manager had been ejected for arguing a balk call by the head umpire. An act which had garnered a brief discussion from a couple of analysts on

one of the panel segments on the Sports Network of America, SNA, that Gilles had watched earlier that morning.

“Here, I think you’ll need this more than me” subsequently coming from Gilles as he handed the booklet back to James and turned his focus out of the window.

“You know, it’s normal if you’re nervous Gilles, I was at my first game, but all you have to do is just pretend that you’re out playing with friends and all your nerves usually go away,” coming from James as Gilles focused on the passing roadside. The sight being a welcome distraction to make the time pass by so that before Gilles knew it, their small Toyota was pulling into the parking lot of Bagley Fields, the vehicle coming to a stop as it pulled into a parking slot before the car’s doors and trunk flew open.

“Alright Gilles, we’re eight minutes early, you go and find your team, we’ll join you as soon as we can” coming from Gilles’ father as the boy ran and grabbed his baseball bag from the car’s trunk. Slung the item over his shoulder just as his father arrived and began gathering the many light blankets and folded bleacher chairs that had been tossed in the trunk earlier that same morning.

“Good luck” being his words before Gilles secured the bag over his left shoulder and ran off towards the field, winding his way through the crowd of children with similarly colored uniforms and a wide range of baseball caps. The mixture of colors, caps, and people causing a feeling of confusion and loss to slowly begin to creep into Gilles’ chest as he got closer and closer to the shared concessions area between fields one and two, the size of the crowd seeming to grow with his anxiety.

‘Where is everybo-’ beginning to flash through his mind, only to be stopped when someone grabbed him by the wrist of his right hand, causing him to come face to face with Jaren.

“There you are,” coming from his teammate, before he turned and, without warning, quickly began dragging the young boy off to the side of the crowd. The two of them cutting through a group of particularly slickly dressed, and confident-looking, kids dressed in yellow wearing black hats that had the

logo of a star with one of the points on its left side missing. None of whom paid him or Jaren any attention whatsoever to the point that they all almost looked through the two of them as they passed by.

“They’re the Astros,” coming from Jaren in a low whisper as Gilles looked at all thirteen of the yellow clad athletes, one of whom got a small amount of joy in being looked at as the two of them passed.

‘The ones on TV looked cooler’ running through Gilles’ mind, even if he chose to keep his mouth shut until the two of them had passed the group.

“Are they good?” being the first thing that flew from Gilles once he was positive that he and Jaren were out of ear shot.

“Sort of,” being Jaren’s elected answer, earning his arm a slight tug of resistance from Gilles as well as a raised eyebrow.

“Their coach is good, he coaches baseball at one of the local high schools that often goes to the state championship” being the boy’s more in-depth answer, earning him a nod from Gilles before he turned and with a declaration of.

“Come on we’re going to be late” began pulling Gilles once again, this time at a slightly quicker pace, the led to Gilles catching sight of his navy-blue clad teammates gathered on the far side of the home bleachers for field two.

“What took you so long?” coming from a slightly irritated Taylor as the two arrived.

“We met the Astros,” being Jaren’s answer, before tilting his head towards Gilles, then adding.

“And he had questions,” the second half of the answer causing Taylor to roll his eyes and shake his head before walking away, leaving Gilles with more questions than answers. If only he’d gotten the chance to ask them, however, he never got the chance as another sudden tug on his shoulder sent him sprawling into the open embrace of Anthony.

“You came!” coming from the boy as he tightly squeezed Gilles.

“I was worried, you’d gotten cold feet.”

“Why would get cold feet Anthony? The season has just started” coming from another voice and sending Gilles gaze up towards Carson, or what at least looked to be Carson from Gilles’ impaired view. Luckily for Gilles, Anthony never got to answer Carson’s question as before he could answer his friend’s question a voice came over the old, static filled, loudspeakers of the field’s public address system.

“Will all teams please assemble near the main on field entrance of field one, I repeat, will all teams please assemble near the main on field entrance of field one” sending the whole team scurrying off towards the main entrance to look onto the field, and allowing Gilles to fall onto his knees and take in a few gasps of air before slowly moving to join them. Finding that, much to his surprise, the group hadn’t gathered in a single line, but instead was crowding around in a bunch to watch as several of the league organizers take the field and make speeches, before the national anthem was played. The whole affair ending with the announcement, or in the case of the Mariners confirming their match up against the Marlins, of that day’s schedule before the ceremony ended and the teams either went off towards their own fields or somewhere else to kill time.

“Alright boys, this way” coming from Coach Lamar before he guided the group of nine in the opposite direction and into the visitor’s dugout, everyone plopping their gear down on the dugout bench before going out to left field. Their stretching and throwing warmups while their coaches wrote set the line-up, with Coach Lamar delivering to the umpire when it was finished, while Coach Pat called them in.

“Anthony first, Mutende second, Taylor third, Jaren fourth, Carson fifth, Ethan sixth, Kyle seventh, Gilles eighth, Oriel ninth,” he declared as, each name almost coming coordinated with each player who came in, before hanging the clipboard by the on-field entrance and heading to first base. Each of the first three players called on the list dutifully putting on one of the seven helmets available that fit them best, everyone but Taylor and Oriel having their own helmet, before Anthony grabbed a bat and

went up to home plate. His short trek to the white dish, causing Gilles' attention to fall upon a large, tall man that sported a large grey mustache and a head of flowing grey hair behind the plate with only a backwards turned baseball cap and a face mask.

"Who's that?" Gilles asked as he walked towards the dugout entrance, his movement sending Carson's attention towards Homeplate.

"Oh, that's old Sam, he's been here since the league began" being the boys' casual, almost dismissive answer, as though he was disappointed that this small matter was what had caught Gilles' attention, adding.

"I think he also did some professional umpiring for a while" as he walked back to his spot on the bench while Anthony, having stepped into the batter's box, took the first pitch, a fastball at the knees, for a ball. Anthony turning, glancing down the third base line, and receiving no sign from Coach Lamar, returned his focus back to the pitch. The small boy, who was only just shorter than Ethan, delivered another ball before managing to deliver a ball to the inside corner for strike one.

"Alright Anthony, let it go, let it go" coming from Coach Lamar as Anthony nodded and returned his focus towards the pitcher and swinging on the next pitch, making contact, and looping it over the first baseman for a single to start the game, a light round of applause from his parents, and high five from Coach Pat.

"Move him up Mutende," coming from the stands as the towering boy gingerly made his way towards home plate, looking down the third base line the whole way, before reaching the batter's box and taking the first pitch for a ball. However, if the pitcher thought that he'd get a free first strike he was wrong, as, on the very next pitch, Mutende swung and sent a line drive right up the middle of in field. The ball only failing short of the outfield due to the quick feet and nifty glove of the shortstop, who snagged the ball before diving towards second base and tagging the bag milliseconds before Anthony slid into it. Deciding to keep the ball in his mitt as he did so rather than test his luck on a throw to first for the double

play, leaving Mutende at first while Anthony hopped up from where he was and jogged back to the dugout, his once white pants now covered in brown dirt.

“Nice try Anthony” greeting him as he reached home plate, picked up Mutende’s bat, and scurried his way back to the dugout as Taylor reached the plate.

“What’s he throwing?” being the second thing that greeted Anthony, this time from Ethan, as the short boy was hanging up his batting helmet and putting his batting gloves in his bag.

“The usual stuff, fastballs” coming from Anthony just as there was the faint sound of metal hitting leather, snapping Gilles’ attention back to the field to see the ball rolling away towards the home team’s dugout, where it was picked up by one of the Marlin’s reserve players and tossed to the first base umpire.

“You’re sure about that?” coming from behind Gilles as he flashed his gaze over to the manual scoreboard behind home plate, a piece of wood with black boards for team names and cards for hits, errors, run, balls, and strikes that had the current count at 1 ball and 2 strikes, then focused on Taylor. His gaze reached the boy just in time to see him step forward and miss, for the second out of the inning.

“Because I think he just threw a changeup” Carson added as Jaren walked up to the plate, hit patting of Taylor on the head as the two passed doing little to full the boy’s frustration with himself. Unlike his predecessors Jaren didn’t waste any pitches and chose to swing on the first delivery he got, the pitch, a fastball, being sent into the air on a hardline drive directly towards deep centerfield. The first height of the ball causing the centerfielder to come in before turning around and running to catch it, his effort forcing him to jump into the air slightly to catch the ball on its line drive path, before landing on his knees and sliding a few inches to end the inning.

“Hey boys, that’s just baseball for you” coming from Coach Lamar when he reached the dugout, the whole team, minus Carson who chose to help Oriel put on his catcher’s gear, gathered around him with their mitts as he added.

“Sometimes you score on a dribbler down third base line, other times the opposing team gets a web gem on a line drive that should’ve been a double, all that matters is how you react to it,” before stepping aside in a silent addition of.

“Now let’s go!” freeing up the whole team, including the fully suited up Oriel, to take their positions on the field, with Gilles rounding out the humble team of nine at first base. Each one of his teammates on the infield seeming to deliver their warmup throws to him with a notable pop in their step and added power in their deliveries, each thwack of his glove jerking his left hand just a little bit.

“Hey guys, settle down” coming from Jaren in centerfield as the balls were tossed in.

“It doesn’t matter how hard you throw the ball if you can’t get it on target.”

‘It does to me’ going through Gilles’ head in a silent rebuff as he watched the first Marlin batter walk up to the plate, the boy’s black uniform and pats matching perfectly with his black hat and its white “M,” as he massaged his left hand. If Jaren’s decision to swing on the first pitch of his at bat was almost brazen then the lead off hitter’s seemed to be out sense of self-defense, for he flailed wildly at the first pitch from Taylor which came inside and earned the young boy a round of cheers from his teammates.

“Come on Zach, he can’t pitch.”

“Get us started,” and.

“Just wait and he’ll walk you” all coming before Taylor delivered his second pitch of the at bat for a strike, this time taken, before getting the batter to swing at an inside fastball for strike three; with the second batter also striking out, but this time looking.

‘I think Taylor may have taken his strike out and those cheers a little personally’ crossing Gilles mind as the boy on the mound delivered another pitch, all of them vanishing at the sound of the bat hitting the ball. His eyes moving to the plate to see the ball only a few feet from home plate and Oriel quickly moving out of his crouch, before grabbing the ball and delivering a strike to first base for a sure out. Or

what would have been a sure out, had the throw not been off target enough to force Gilles to take a large step towards home plate to get the ball.

‘I’ve got it!’ charging through his mind as the thwack of the ball hitting the webbing of his mitt echoed in his mind and a smile crossed his face.

‘Not bad for my first-.’

“Safe! Safe!” being the call that told Gilles otherwise sending his gaze first to the umpire in confusion and then to the bag to notice that he was just off the base by about three inches. His face to heating up slightly at the realization, and a faint shade of pink to become visible to the umpire and the batter before he rose and tossed the ball to the pitcher.

“S-sorry” fumbling out from his mouth.

“It’s okay Gilles” and.

“You’ll get another chance,” making their way across the infield as the next batter jogged up to the plate. However, Gilles did not get another chance to make up for his mistake, at least not in that inning, as Taylor proceeded to get the next batter to pop out to Anthony at short. Instead, his opportunity came the next half inning when he found himself walking up to the plate with runners on first and third and only one out. The encouraging calls of his teammates drifting into his ears as he meekly, apologetically, stepped into the batter’s box and took his relaxed stance with the bat close to his chest.

‘Okay, remember what coach said, read the situation’ going through his head as he looked at the first and third basemen, noticing that the third baseman had come in slightly and that Coach Lamar wasn’t giving any signs, before turning his attention back to the pitcher. The young boy nodding before entering his windup, stepping forwards, and delivering a ball the curved in towards Gilles, causing the young boy to instinctively step backwards.

“Strike!” coming from the umpire before the ball hit the catcher’s mitt.

“W-what?” bumbling out of Gilles’ mouth as he looked at the plate in confusion.

“It was in the zone” the umpire simply said, before looking at the boy and adding.

“You also stepped out of the box,” the words sending Gilles’ gaze down to see that his back foot was three quarters of the way out of the batter’s box.

“O-o-oh” meekly coming from him as he stepped back into the batter’s box and the catcher returned the ball to the pitcher.

“You’ve got to stay in there Gilles!” be the one call he could make sense of in the round of supportive cheers that followed. Advice he took on the next pitch, a changeup way inside that he swung out of panic, not noticing that there was no way the ball would have been a strike if it stayed on its path of flight, placing him in a no ball two strike hole.

‘I got to hold on, fight it off’ he thought, his mind going back to the calls from Coach Lamar to “defend the plate” that had been given to Oriel before he had hit the one out single that put runners on the corners. The words accelerating in speed and intensity as the pitcher nodded, set, and then went to throw the ball, reaching a fever pitch as the white sphere sped towards him at a speed that meant it could only be a fastball. Causing Gilles to step forward, move his hands back, and swing in one go at a ball he would have contacted; had it not stayed at the height of his neck, flying over his outstretched bat for strike three and the second out of the inning, while leaving Gilles absolutely perplexed.

“It’s okay Gilles, it’s never easy to hit a pitcher who can move the ball around the strike zone like that” being the comforting words from Jaren that met Gilles as he reached the dugout, the boy taking off his helmet and placing his bat on the rack with a faint jitter in his arms as he did so.

‘Thank God it’s over’ running through his mind before he paused.

'It's over, it's already over and I didn't do anything,' coming as his relief turned to slight frustration at his lack of success, frustration which did not get much time to fester within him as familiar voice called out.

"Hey! We need to catch the game and support our team!" before he felt a jolt from the shirt on his back and was dragged over to the on-field fence of dugout. Arriving in time to see Kyle make contact a 1-1 pitch, sending a ball slowly down the third base line, with the ball ending up in fair territory and allowing Carson to score from third and give them a 1-0 lead. Anthony disappearing from his side to get a single that loaded the bases before Mutende hit a ground ball that was easily fielded by the third baseman who touched third base to end the inning. All four of the boys having their mitts handed to them as the Mariners took the field and the Marlins came off it, Gilles dutifully making it to first base along with the opposing team's coach.

"Hey kid" being the man's words as they reached the bag.

"If you want to avoid being pulled off the bag, try planting your dominant foot on it and stepping with you non-dominant one" being his only instructions, pointing at the bag as he did so, before the inning began. While the advice was more than welcome, anything was at this point to prevent Gilles from making the same mistake twice, he did not get a chance to put it to any use as Taylor once again stuck out the first two batters of the inning before the final one hit a high, lazy pop fly to left field for the third out. Likewise, little happened in the top half of the inning, as Taylor led off with a strike out and Jaren doubled before a ground out to the third baseman by Carson kept Jaren at third and a ground out by Ethan to second ended the inning. Sending them once again out into the field to protect their slim 1-0 lead, an endeavor that was made slightly more precarious with back-to-back walks by Taylor to start the inning without any outs.

"Okay guys, remember, double play depth and outfield go three" coming from Coach Lamar in the dugout as Taylor took the sign from Oriel before delivering an outside pitch for a ball. The pause

allowing Gilles to glance and note how Kyle had moved in slightly while Anthony seemed to take up a position that would allow him to move between second and third with ease, and Carson moved closer to second base, before turning his attention back to the plate.

‘Got to go to second, got to go to second,’ beginning to echo in his head as he squatted down slightly and saw Taylor move to throw the ball.

‘Got to-’ the chant was cut off by the sound of the bat making contact and sending the ball speeding towards him on a line drive that was to his left. The sight of which forced him to hurry backwards to get it, fielding the ball five steps away from first base before turning to throw it to second.

“No, no, no!” being the cry from Carson as he ran towards second, his arms cross to prevent Gilles from throwing, sending Gilles’ focus back to first base before he proceeded to sprint to the bag in a race with the runner that was like a game of chicken, with each boy daring the other to veer off. The boy making a dash for the orange part of the bag in foul territory, a testimony to the field’s use for both baseball and softball, while Gilles sprinted for the side on the infield. Both boys reaching the bag at about the same time before the batter decided to try and touch the bag before jumping away, to imply fielder’s interference or to show he’d gotten there first. Either way the result was that while both of their cleats touched the bag Gilles’ was louder.

“You’re out!” from the first base umpire being the reward for his determination, making it runners on second and third with one out. Unfortunately, the breaks ended there as the next batter sent a line drive up the middle of the infield, past Carson, and Anthony for a single that scored both runners, making it 2-1 in favor of the Marlins, with Taylor cutting off the throw from Jaren.

“It’s okay Taylor, it’s only two runs” coming from Kyle as Taylor took the sign from Oriel and delivered the first pitch to the next batter, aiming for the same spot low in the strike zone. Luckily, he was able to get the batter to chase this time, sending a groundball towards Carson, who flipped it to Anthony, who stepped on second and fired it to first. His throw being a good deal more on target, and a little softer,

than the one Oriel had done in the first, making it so that Gilles was easily to plant his right foot, step forwards with his left, and stretch to secure the inning ending double play.

“Alright guys, way to get out of it” being the encouraging words from Coach Pat, alongside a pat on the hat from Coach Lamar, that awaited Gilles when the team reached the dugout and quickly exchanged their mitts for bats to start their half of the fourth inning. An inning which saw Gilles silently make his way up to home plate with one out following a groundout back to the pitcher by Oriel.

“Come on Gilles, now that you’ve seen him, you can hit him” being the encouragement that came from Coach Lar and was echoed by Gilles teammates from the dugout as he stepped up to the plate.

‘Calm down,’ going through Gilles mind as he watched the pitcher nod before going into his windup and delivered the pitch.

‘He hit with an inside breaking ball, so just stay still,’ coming as the ball went away from him and curved back in at the last second.

‘It should be a-’

“Strike!” cutting Gilles off and causing his mind to go blank as the catcher tossed the ball back to the pitcher.

‘Well, he didn’t say it was out of the zone last time, just that I was out of the box’ running through Gilles head before the next pitch, a ball that he fouled off, put him in a 0 ball 2 strike count. The situation caused him to lower his bat just slightly to make it easier to swing to protect the zone as the pitcher came back with another pitch, a fastball that looked to be aimed at the outside corner.

‘Got it’ shooting through his mind like a bolt of lightning before he swung and sent the ball on a line drive down the first base line, and directly into the glove of the first baseman for the second out. His polishing of the ball earning him little more than frustration, a few pats on the back, and a seat on the bench as he watched Kyle hit a ground ball back to pitcher to end the inning. If there was any solace it

came to the fact that the Marlins didn't score either, that Anthony hit a single to lead off the fifth and was bunted over by Mutende before Jaren came to bat following a strike out by Taylor. The elder McCormik boy changing everything with one swing of the bat with an RBI triple before being scored on a single that made it 3-2, then being followed by a double by Ethan that made it 4-2 before inning was over. A lead which managed to stand tall through a tough fifth that saw the Marlins load the bases before two in field flies and a strike out ended the inning and set up Carson to relieve him in the bottom of the sixth.

"Easy does it Carson, you just need one more" coming from the stands as the final Marlins batter stepped up to the plate, the first two having popped out to Jaren in shallow center field. The words holding immediate sway as Carson threw a change-up to the batter, who fouled it off for strike one.

"Come on David, he's nowhere near as fast as their starter" being the counter-call by a player in the Marlins dugout as Carson delivered another change-up that was again fouled off for strike two.

'My first game played, my first win' gently crossing Gilles' mind as he watched Carson nod before stepping to deliver another pitch.

'Who would have thought' passing just as the batter contacted the ball, sending it right towards Kyle at third who fielded it cleanly before stepping and throwing it across the infield. Gilles repeating the process of planting his right foot and stepping with his left to extend and almost pluck the ball out of the air to end the game.

"Hey, way to get the last one for us" joyfully coming from Jaren as he ran over from second base, where he'd been sent when Taylor was relieved, a swap that led to him at second, Ethan in center field, and Taylor in right field. The boy's congratulations came before he threw an arm round Gilles' shoulder and holding up his pointer and middle fingers, then declaring.

"Two more and we're in the playoffs" and earning him a look from Gilles.

“There are playoffs?” causing a laugh to come from Jaren as the two of them reached their line up to shake hands with the opposing team.

“Sure are, and the team that wins them gets to represent the league” being the last Jaren was able to say before Coach Lamar directed him to face forwards so that they could be sportsman like.

‘Playoffs, mom would definitely see my games then’ being the last thing to run through Gilles’ mind before he reached the first Marlins player and gave a high five.

Chapter 8

The next half hour of Gilles' experience seemed to go by in only a few seconds. He remembered shaking hands with the opposing team, and he remembered the team meeting after the game, where Coach Lamar and Coach Pat had congratulated them on their effort and outcome of the game. Their words of congratulations came before they gave some opening details about what to expect for the next game. However, outside of those two things he could remember nothing, which was why, as he sat in the booth of the restaurant where his family had stopped for lunch, Gilles found his attention aimed at the table in front of him, but not at it.

'I can't believe it' being the only thought that had been going through his mind as he sat in the booth, gradually becoming increasingly acquainted with the table that stood in front of him.

"Gilles, you, okay?" snapping him from his trance and sending his attention up and to the right to see his father looking at him with a plate of salad in front of him.

"Yeah dad, I am" quietly coming from Gilles before he began to look around the restaurant and examine the various baseball games and the golf tournament that were on several of the restaurant's many TVs.

"It's just, a lot has happened over the last two weeks" coming as he resettled his gaze on his father, having found nothing of interest to him, his answer causing a smile to come over his father's face.

"How so?"

“Well, two weeks ago we’d just moved here, and I had no friends, and no knowledge of baseball,” Gilles continued, raising his pointer and middle finger as he named each of the things which had changed, each one causing his father to nod.

“And now...” coming from Gilles before pausing slightly, allowing his father to pick up where he left off.

“Now you’re on a baseball team and have new friends who want to hang out with you,” the suggestion earning him an energetic nod from Gilles.

“Yeah, James is the one who's supposed to have all the friends,” Gilles began, gesturing with his left pointer finger towards the hallway where James had disappeared to find the restaurant’s restroom.

“Not me, no one outside of our family likes me” the second half of his statement earning him a raised eyebrow from his father.

“I wouldn’t say that Gilles, you’ve just had a tough time meeting people, that’s all” his father began, reaching out and gently patting Gilles’ shoulder before adding.

“And that’s why the fact you found a hobby that you like and that can connect you to other people is so important” the words prompting Gilles to send another glance over towards the hallway where James had disappeared.

“Then what about James?”

“Don’t worry he’ll make plenty of new friends once we find an affordable basketball league for him to play in or once school starts” coming from his father eating a mouthful of salad and asking.

“So, what did Coach Lamar say to you after the game?”

“He said that it would be at night and at a place called ‘Harmony Sports Complex’” Gilles, began before shrugging his shoulders.

“He also said that our next two practices would be ‘surprises,’ so you’ll probably get an email in the next few days.”

“Good, then if that’s all that’s on your mind, why don’t you go and see what the pizza bar has to offer” his father suggested, pointing with his right thumb, and sending Gilles’ attention to the large assortment of food that lay on various hot tables by the entrance to the restaurant’s kitchen. The odd mixture of smells reached Gilles’ nostrils before he rose from his seat and moved to get something to eat. His father’s words sticking with him for the whole of the weekend, the advice coming to the forefront of his mind anytime the subject of his baseball team came up. Which between the many parents that Gilles’ father spoke to at their Church and his many relatives meant that the words played on a loop in his head. Each replay being accompanied by a single thought in Gilles’ mind.

‘If dad’s right this could be the start of many good friendships.’

“Gilles! Gilles!” being the call that broke him out of this train of thought before he was hit square in the chest and caused him to stumble backwards a few steps. A grunt escaping his lips before he looked down and noticed the large, brown, basketball falling off his chest, prompting him to reach out and fumble with the ball slightly.

“You know you have to pay attention when you’re on a court” coming from James just as Gilles managed to grab the ball, then toss it back to James.

“Sorry,” being all he could sheepishly reply, knowing that his brother was right, he’d been hearing the same thing since the first year the two of them played their first year of basketball.

“You’re lucky that I hit that, and it didn’t go off the rim” James continued before shooting the ball again, this time bouncing the ball off the rim and right back into his waiting arms. The sight causing Gilles to begin scratching his head at the memory of how the two had seen one of their teammates learn that lesson the hard way.

“Yeah, yeah” coming from him just as he ran over where the poor boy had slammed his head on the wood of the floor at their old recreation center.

“Anyway, what were you zoning out about?” James asked, his words coming just as he shot another basket, this time getting nothing but net, and running over to get the ball as it bounced away.

“Oh, just something that dad and I talked about on Sunday” casually coming from Gilles while his brother took another shot.

“What did you talk about” automatically coming from the boy before he jogged over to get the ball again.

“Just about how things have changed since we moved here” being the general answer that Gilles was willing to give, not really wanting to get too deep into the details. His hope that such a broad answer leaving him unprepared for the way that James suddenly turned towards him, an almost relieved look on his face before declaring.

“I know, they use the imperial system for everything” and catching his basketball under his left arm.

“The first day we were here it said 80 degrees and I thought my heart was going to stop”, the latter comment causing Gilles to lean backwards. His mind going back to the first full night they had spent in their new house after arranging their furniture, the sound of the loud bang having sent him straight up in bed in a confused and dazed state.

‘So that’s the loud thump I heard when that morning.’

“And I was always surprised at how Americans got places so fast while driving so slow” breaking Gilles out of his thoughts just in time to see James shrug his shoulders before adding.

“But I just looked up a conversion chart and it made a little more sense,” then shooting another shot.

“That’s good” being all that Gilles could say, his quiet response barely being audible over the sound of the ball going into the net with a perfect swish.

“Yeah, it is” James shouted, running over, and grabbing the ball before turning and passing it to Gilles.

“Here” reaching Gilles’ ears about the same time that the ball landed in his hands. The impact sending Gilles’ attention down to the slightly worn-down ball, just as James gave an encouraging.

“Take a shot” the words making Gilles pause and think for a second. Before stepping forwards, jumping, and extending his arms, sending the ball flying over the top of the backboard of the hoop; giving him a single thought.

‘And that’s why I stopped playing basketball.’ Luckily for Gilles, James was merciful and chose to spend the rest of the evening taking his own shots, rather than offering them to Gilles, but their conversation still stuck in his mind throughout the rest of the week. Or at least the important parts did as he found himself riding silently in the back seat of his father’s car, his eyes glued on the many businesses that went by as they made their way down the main street of the city’s “downtown.” The term being rather loose, as rather than a large metropolis, like that of Montreal, downtown Vancouver was simply a few tall buildings that were surrounded by many single- and two-story restaurants and shops.

‘I didn’t know there was a downtown, I thought it was just suburban houses’ running through Gilles’ mind as they moved past a restaurant titled “Jean’s Southern BBQ.” The car’s speed allowing Gilles to get a brief peak into the establishment to see the mostly African American waitstaff racing around to serve the customers who had gathered there as soon as possible. Gilles’ putting his face up against the window and straining to get as long of a look at the restaurant as possible.

“See something you like?” Gilles’ father asked, the question moving the boy away from the window and back into his seat, muttering.

“Not really” as he leaned back into the seat and closed his eyes, his relaxed posture allowing him to feel the car slow down before turning to the right and coming to a stop, sending Gilles out of the car and to the trunk to grab his ball bag.

“Your, coach said that this would be a normal length practice,” his father began as he opened the door and popped up from the driver's seat.

“So, I’ll head home and come back, I shoot to be waiting for you in the reception room, okay?” he added, his question earning him a nod from Gilles before the boy turned and jogged through the front door of the small, yet well maintained, store front with the sign “Batting A Thousand” on it. While the front of the store was simple, the interior of the waiting room for the store was anything but. Across the entirety of the back wall there were thirty-two photos of various baseball parks, while on the right and left walls were strewn with pictures of many baseball players. The smiling faces of Tony Gwynn, Jackie Robinson, Nolan Ryan, Willie Mays, Randy Johnson, Ricky Henderson, Orel Hershiser, Manny Ramirez, Robert Clemente, and many others beaming towards Gilles. Before he threw a casual glance up towards the ceiling and saw thirty-two remarkably well-maintained pennants plastered on the interior.

“Talk about a baseball nut’s dream palace” moving out of Gilles’ mouth in a whisper, before the sound of footsteps sent Gilles’ attention to the doorway from the back of the store just in time to see a large Asian man walk in.

“Hello, you must be with that other group that came in” the man stated, a smile coming over his face when Gilles gave a silent nod, before gesturing towards the door and friendly adding.

“Go in, they’re already waiting,” his words sending Gilles through the door with a quick.

“Thank you, *Monsieur*” and into the rear of the building, where he was meet with the sight of five pristine looking batting cages the sported their own well maintained pitching machines, backdrops that mirrored professional baseball stadiums, and artificial turf for the batter’s box.

“Wow” coming out of Gilles’ mouth in a silent whisper as he caught sight of his teammates, moving over towards them, and seeing that they were eagerly looking over the various parts of interior of the building while one of them climbed into one of the cages. Their breathless admiration of the building around them leaving them unaware of Gilles’ arrival.

“Remember, there’s nine of us so we’ll be breaking up into groups of three and rotate every twenty balls, and one group under Jaren will have to manage themselves” Coach Pat instructed before climbing into the second batting cage as Jaren moved to do the same, his gaze falling on Gilles as he did so.

“Oh, hey Gilles” greeting the young boy as a wide smile came across the taller boy’s face as he added.

“Nice to see you’re here,” causing Gilles to point back towards the front of the store.

“Sorry, my dad was late, but that man at the front-”

“Mr. Chen?” Jaren asked, earning a nod from Gilles.

“Mr. Chen showed me in, it was very nice of him” he finished, his words causing Jaren to laugh slightly.

“Well, since you’re the last one here, how about you help me to set up the speed and height of the pitching machine,” the boy stated, a suggestion that Gilles nodded at before quickly donning his helmet, white batting gloves, and bat then darting into the batting cage after Jaren, pretending he didn’t hear the whisper of.

“Better him than me,” from one of his teammates behind him as he stepped into the cage’s batter’s box, looking towards the other end to see Jaren climbing behind the pitching machine and beginning to mess with the mechanics.

“I’m going to try and adjust the machine’s setting” Jaren began as he flipped on a switch that send the machine vaguely humming to life.

“Swing at anything that’s close, we’ll count these as some of your practice swings” coming just as he placed a yellow practice ball in the machine, sending the sphere flying towards Gilles and slamming into the canvas backdrop at about the height of his eyes.

‘Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea’ slowly coming into Gilles mind as he began to understand why his fellow teammates were reluctant to go first, his understanding increasing when the second ball went by around the height of his neck and was just a little too close for his comfort. Fortunately, Jaren got the hang of the machine at the third pitch, and by the fifth had managed to get it set to the right height to be at Gilles’ chest and at the proper speed of 55 miles per hour. Sending him into the batter’s box as Jaren pulled out a small, crumpled, piece of paper and murmuring.

“Okay, so Coach said that you need to work on inside and outside pitches” before turning the machine slightly towards Gilles and inserting a ball. Another yellow sphere speeding towards Gilles and causing him to instinctively jump backwards, just as the ball landed comfortably on the inside of the plate and far away from hitting him if he was still in the batter’s box.

“Strike!” coming from Jaren as he raised a clenched right fist into the air.

“That’s hardly fair, that ball was on a straighter line than the one the pitcher threw on Saturday” Gilles cried before stepping back into the batter’s box, his reply earning a simple shrug from Jaren.

“Doesn’t matter, if you step out of the batter’s box after the ball is thrown it’s a strike, and if you do it often enough pitchers will toss it to that spot all game” he began, picking up another yellow ball before adding.

“You either have to foul it off, get a hit, or get hit, but dancing out of the way isn’t an option” as he inserted it into the machine. Sending the ball whizzing towards Gilles in the same spot and leaving him

little choice but to go into his swing quickly, his wild follow through causing the firm, yet not incredibly hard, rubber ball to bounce off the top of his right hand. The adrenaline and slight sting of the impact causing Gilles to release his bat in surprise, sending it flying over to the edge of cage where it slammed into the chain-link with a loud clatter.

“*Sacre!*” flying from his mouth, not in pain, but in surprise that the ball had hit him and that it hadn’t hurt, the adrenaline that sends his fight or flight response up his spine taking care of that.

“Hey, is your hand, okay?” coming from Jaren as feeling slowly began to return to Gilles’ arm in the form of dull, notable, ache in his hand as well as the sight of a slight amount of red swelling. The sight causing Gilles to decide to gingerly touch the swollen parts of his hand before giving a silent nod, a slightly dazed look still on his face.

‘I’m glad it doesn’t hurt as bad as I thought it would, but it’s still weird’ running through his mind as he gently rubbed his hand against his chest.

“Alright, if you say so,” being Jaren’s cry that pulled Gilles’ attention from his hand and back to the pitching machine.

“You almost had that last one, try to stand further towards the outside of the box if a pitcher or umpire is favoring the inside of the strike zone” he added, his words causing Gilles to move to the part of the batter’s box that was further away from home plate before asking.

“Like this?” his questing receiving an affirmative nod from Jaren as the older boy pulled another ball from his bucket and raised it to the whirling white tire the machine used to throw the ball. An action which Gilles answered by closing his stance and moving his hands towards his right hip in expectation of the ball. Jaren’s releasing of the white sphere causing it to touch the machine’s whirling tire and be sent flying towards Gilles and, with Gilles this time expecting the ball, he was able to track the ball better and have a better controlled swing. Allowing him to make contact and send the ball directly into the netting on the left side of the cage for a swish.

“Foul!” thing time coming from Jaren as he threw his right arm out and then reached for another ball, his words and actions barely earning so much as a nod from Gilles.

‘I was a little late, I need to time it up better and send it right back at Jaren’ instead going through his head as he watched the boy put another ball into the machine. His eyes tracking the ball like that of a hawk before stepping forwards and managing to make clean contact straight onto the ball, sending it as a line drive back towards the mound before it bounced off the fake turf. Deflecting directly into the Jaren’s casually outstretched left hand, earning Gilles a clever smile.

“Trying to take my head off?” coming before the boy inserted another ball, which Gilles eyed, tracked, and stepped towards before making contact and sending the ball on a line drive to the right of the cage. Starting a hitting streak that would continue until the last ball of his turn in the cage and was followed up by a few minutes of him gathering the balls he’d sprayed around the cage while Jaren adjusted the machine for the cage’s next occupant.

“So, I see you’ve finally started to make contact” greeting Gilles as he exited the cage and removed his helmet, pausing to look up and see the familiar face of Ethan standing next to him. The brown-haired, freckle-faced boy standing with his bat placed behind his shoulders and held there by his arms in a manner that was as casual as his tone.

“Yeah, I guess” Gilles’ replied, unsure as to whether or not the word “finally” was supposed to be the boy’s ways of supporting his success or his own private relief that Gilles could potentially help carry the team’s offensive load. Gilles decided that it was best not to ask, assuming he’d risk losing a compliment by doing so, and instead focused on the fresh dust marks that coated his bat. His attempts to clean the large piece of metal off only causing the marks to smear all over the beautiful blue paint.

“You know, you could be a good contact hitter” Ethan added, his words earning him Gilles’ undivided attention and make the sound of metal bats hitting rubber balls fade slightly into the background.

“Doesn’t everyone try to make contact with the ball?”

“Contact hitters are people who simply look to put the ball in play, mostly on the ground, to get on base” Ethan began, raising his pointer finger on his left hand as he did so.

“Others, power hitters, primarily try to hit home runs” sending his thumb out.

“While others can be really good at bunting” coming as he raised his middle finger, bringing up all the fingers on the right side of his left hand, before he lowered his fingers so that only his pointer finger was left.

“But the contact hitter’s the most important, because without him there’s no one to bunt in and any home runs would only be one run” finishing his explanation, before he glanced towards Gilles’ batting cage prompting Gilles to turn likewise and see Jaren adjust the pitching machine before rotating spots to get his own turn at bat. The two boys watched in silence as Jaren proceeded to go into his batting stance and foul off the first few pitches before beginning to contact each of the balls head on. Alternating between sending them either soaring into the roof netting of the batting at an angle that would have been a home run or a deep pop fly and hitting line drives that would have been doubles or triples if they had been outside, the balls instead ricocheting around the cage.

“I’m guessing that Jaren’s our power hitter” breaking the silence before Jaren contacted another ball, Gilles’ question being answered by a simple nod from Ethan as Jaren hit one last ball before cleaning up his mess.

“Gilles! You’re up again” coming from Jaren as he did so, his words making Gilles hop up from the bench where he was sitting. The corner of his left eye allowing him to see Ethan standing and watching him walk away. As though, in admitting that Jaren was the team’s definitive power hitter he’d had to admit something that was more important. That he was not.

Chapter 9

The rest of the practice went smoothly, with Gilles managing to make more contact with each visit that turn that he took in the batting cage, each swing of the bat bringing him slightly more control over the direction the ball went off the bat. Leaving Gilles with an optimistic feeling in his chest as he sat in the rear of his father's car heading back home, Coach Lamar's words from the end of the practice vaguely echoing in his head.

"You guys made good contact" Coach Lamar had begun, his tone being slightly faster than its usual calm, measured, considerate tone. The change being because, unlike at Bagley Fields, the team could not stick around long after the end of practice, that was unless he wanted to get changed with loitering.

“We’re starting to get better at aiming the ball in practice and controlling where it’s going, and that’s something we’ll need in order to keep pace with the team we’ll be playing tomorrow night” he added, his words getting a series of nods from across the faces of the gathered members of the team as a different thought crossed Gilles’ mind.

‘Wait it’s a night game?’

“But remember, when you’re at bat in a game, all that matters is that you shoot to make good contact with the ball and force the pitcher to throw strikes” Coach Lamar finished, his words of mixed instruction and encouragement being followed by a cry of:

“And just hit it where they ain’t” from Coach Pat, sending a round of laughs around the nine gathered players, before the first parents began to arrive to pick them up.

“Hey Gilles, did you have a good practice?” pulling Gilles from his thoughts and returning his attention back to the car as the vehicle went into a slightly banked right angle as it rolled down the highway.

“Yeah, yeah I did” being all that Gilles answered, his mind resting on two things. First, the way he’d hit the ball all throughout practice, the way it had felt off his bat, the way he’d tracked the ball with his eyes; and second, the upcoming night game. The second subject stuck in the back of his mind for the rest of the night, seeming to bounce into his mind when he wasn’t paying attention, and almost preventing him from being able to get even the slightest amount of sleep. Luckily, after a little bit of late-night reading as well as several glasses of ice-cold water, Gilles was able to get some rest, sleeping in late to compensate for having taken so long to fall asleep. Making it so that he was more than awake when he, James, and his father piled into the car early that evening and began their drive towards the Harmony Sports Complex, with Gilles not voicing his question.

“Hey dad, have you ever played in a night game?” until well after the trio had put some distance between themselves and their house.

“No, can’t say I have” his father replied, without so much as taking a moment to ponder his answer.

“I mostly played basketball, and when I was your age we only ever played in the afternoon” he added, a satisfied smile coming over his face before he finished with.

“Not that it wouldn’t have mattered, being in doors and all that,” his words being followed by a few chuckles, while James lazy rolled his head to face Gilles before asking.

“Didn’t mom play baseball” an inquisitive look on his face as he did so, his words causing Gilles to pause briefly before punching the palm of his left hand with a clenched right fist.

“That’s right! She mentioned that last week when she dropped me off at practice” coming from him before he snapped his fingers in frustration.

“Some good that does me now,” coming from his just as James’ changed the subject.

“Where is mom anyway?” earning him a look from their father via a glance in the rear-view mirror.

“Somewhere over Midwest I’d say, she’s supposed to get in late tonight and then be off until Monday,” sending Gilles’ attention out the side of his window just as they began to turn.

‘So that’s why she took the other car’ running through his head just as they turned onto a gravel path that was the entrance to a large parking lot. Allowing Gilles’ eyes to fall upon the numerous soccer fields that dotted the right side of the field complex, before their father turned the car to the left and into a parking spot. The dust sent into the air by the car only just beginning to settle as Gilles and James climbed out of the car, their father popping the vehicle’s trunk before joining them.

“I thought this was a baseball complex” James stated, his words coming as Gilles’ withdrew his bag from, and shut, the trunk in one swift motion.

“Actually, it’s a dual sports complex, the baseball parts over there” their father answered before pointing off towards the left, causing Gilles and James to simultaneously look that way and see five ball fields, three baseball and two softballs of many sizes surrounding a two-story shack where several people were standing in line. The tall, black, roof of the shack being partially covered by a large banner that had the words “Columbia Youth Baseball League” written in white against a blue banner with an address and phone number.

“Fancy” sliding out of James’ mouth in a mutter that implied genuine interest as Gilles began to slowly jog over towards the complex, sliding his way past the various figures that were returning from the complex. Catching sight of the slightly fancier looking uniforms that each of the figures wore the baseball players boasting caps and uniform shirts that read the name of their Major League Baseball inspired club. The difference in uniform shirt, which made Gilles feel a little subconscious, making it easy for him to find where his teammates and earning him a spot with them on the right side of the second largest baseball field, near the visiting dugout, along with several others. All of them silently watching as the previous game, a matchup between the league’s “Cardinals” and “Reds,” ended in a one sided 13-0 mercy rule game that allowed them more time than normal to fill up the dugout and warm up before the game.

“What a weird field layout” Anthony stated, the comment coming as he donned his batting helmet and batting gloves, his relaxed attitude coming as Jaren put on his batting gloves and sat down next to Gilles.

“You’re just upset that you were nearly late” the older boy replied before placing his helmet on.

“I was only nearly late because the dugout positioning and layout of this place is so weird” Anthony countered, his response only earning a lazy shrug of Jaren’s shoulders and the remark of.

“Well, you better hurry up or you’ll be late to start the game” sending Anthony grumbling up to the plate. Unfortunately, Anthony’s mood didn’t get better in the first inning as he struck out to lead off the inning while Jaren hit a line drive back at the pitcher and Taylor struck out to end the inning. An

outcome that might not have been noteworthy had the opposing team not scored three runs in the bottom of the inning giving them momentum that was only slightly blunted by a leadoff walk from Mutende to start the second inning.

“Come on Gilles” following the young boy as he made his way to the plate, the encouraging words briefly sending his attention over towards the scoreboard where two burning yellow lights were lit under the word “outs,” both having been the strikeouts of Carson and Kyle before him.

“Make some contact” causing him to silently answer.

‘Easier said than done’ in his mind as he stepped into the plate, the nod of the pitcher causing him to remember the loud sound the catcher’s mitt had made when his previous seven teammates had gone before him. Making the ball look as fast as lighting as it moved towards him and sound like thunder as it hit the catcher’s mitt three inches from his knee.

“Strike” sending Gilles’ attention down the third base line towards Coach Lamar.

‘A lot easier said than done’ running through his head before he returned his focus to the pitcher, a sigh of relief leaving his mouth at the knowledge that he didn’t have to lay down a bunt against the pitcher.

‘Not like you would have to do it anyway, there’s too outs’ running through his head as the pitcher stepped and sent the ball speeding towards him which Gilles swung at, and promptly missed.

‘And now two strikes’ going as he watched the pitcher return to the mound, allowing him to glance at the infield.

‘There’s a whole between second and shortstop’ running through his mind as the pitcher nodded before stepping and sending the ball towards him.

‘If I can just angle it there, I’ll get on base’ running through his head as he swung sending the ball right up the middle, and right into the outstretched glove of the pitcher who calmly tossed the ball to first

for the last out of the inning. Luckily, their opponents didn't score either, despite loading the bases with one out, and it wasn't until the fourth inning that their offense finally began to heat up with a leadoff double by Jaren and a sacrifice bunt by Taylor made it one out with a runner on third.

"Come on Carson, let's cash in on the runner" someone shouted from the stands as Carson passed Mutende after the latter struck out for the second out of the inning. The starting second basemen had to wait at the plate for a few minutes while the opposing team's catcher, starting pitcher, and head coach held a conference on the mound.

"They're probably trying to decide what to throw him in advance" Oriel muttered, earning him a glance from Gilles.

"They can do that?"

"Sure" the boy answered, beginning to chew on his lip as he did so, before pointing to the approaching umpire and adding.

"As long as they don't take too long," just as the umpire arriving and breaking up the conference to send the coach to the dugout, the catcher behind the plate, leaving the pitcher on the mound. A pitcher who might have wished he'd chosen a different pitch as Carson swung at the first ball he saw, sending it on a bloop over the first baseman's head to score Jaren and make it 3 to 1. Their only run of the inning as Kyle proceeded to fall into the same trap as Gilles and hit a ground ball back to the pitcher for the last out of the inning.

"Man, that guy covers a lot of ground" being dismayed third baseman's cry as he reached the dugout and removed his helmet. His gaze aimed squarely at the opposing dugout and a look of slight frustration on his face as he watched the opposing pitcher receive numerous high fives from his teammates and coach.

“Way to field your position Grant” going with the high fives as one of the parents in the stands proceeded to give the boy an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

“Hey, consider yourself lucky, you hit off him” being Taylor’s reply, the boy’s frustration evident in the slight fire that appeared in his eyes as he handed Kyle his mitt and hat, along with a scorecard that had four “K” s penciled in on it. Causing Gilles to squint his right eye slightly and think.

‘That’s not that bad,’ his eyes instead being on the fact that they had gotten their first hit that inning thanks to Jaren’s double and their first run thanks to Carson’s single.

‘Maybe this will change the game’ going with a slight rise of hope in Gilles’ chest before he jogged the short distance to first base. His brief spike of optimism being supported by the fact that Jaren managed to not only finally record his first out of the inning, but also managed to strike out the side and grab the momentum.

“Alright Gilles, get us started” and.

“Get your first hit,” coming from the dugout as Gilles reached the plate, his arrival being met by a cold glance from the catcher and an indifferent one from the umpire.

‘Okay, check the field’ going through his head the moment that he reached the box, allowing him to notice that there was once again a hole between the second baseman and shortstop; making a light almost go off in his head and leaving him only one to wait for.

‘The perfect pitch’ echoing as he watched the first pitch go by for a ball, earning him a round of cheers from his as he watched the catcher toss the ball back to the pitcher.

‘He led off my last at bat with a low pitch, and did the same this one,’ he began as he watched the pitcher nod before stepping forwards and delivering his next pitch.

‘Which should me the next one will be either be in the middle or up’ running through his mind as he raised his hands slightly before stepping forward and swinging, only to see the ball suddenly curve downwards and away from him.

‘Crap!’ coming before he altered the path of his swing, moving his bat downward and stretching to make at least some contact. Forgetting not only the fact that there were no outs in the inning but also that there were no strikes, meaning that he could afford to make a mistake without ruining his at bat. Or at least he would have if he hadn’t managed to contact the ball, sending it directly into the ground in front of home plate in fair territory. It took Gilles about a second to fully process that not only had he contacted the ball, but that the ball was still in fair territory, meaning that the ball was therefore live. Dropping his bat at the realization, before sprinting down the first base line, his feet pressing firmly against the artificial surface of the field and each step he took causing a soft smushing sound to become audible.

‘Almost there, almost there’ echoing in his head with every step that he got closer towards to first base. Only for his bid for first base to end when he saw the first baseman lean to Gilles’ left, extend his glove outwards, and easily catch the oncoming ball while Gilles was only a few steps away from the base.

“Out!” the umpire cried, leaving Gilles to take off his helmet before jogging back to the dugout, shaking his head the entire way. His arrival earned him a few sympathetic pats on the back, and the occasional look, before he reached his spot on the bench and proceeded to toss his helmet into the bag.

“You shouldn’t have swung at that” coming from behind him and causing him to let out a slight sigh and answer.

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have.”

“You thought he was going to throw you a ball in the middle or top of the zone” coming next from the voice behind Gilles, to which he could only give a nod of a head just in time to hear a bat contacting something. A sound that made Gilles turn around and see two things, first, Ethan charging down the first base line after having hit a ball directly up the middle splitting the second baseman and

shortstop, and second, Jaren standing next to the on field chain-link fence. A slight smile creeping onto his face before he simply said.

“You were trying to track his pitches, that’s cool,” causing a hopeful look to come over Gilles.

“Really?”

“Well, that and rather weird” Jaren clarified, just as another sound of the bat was heard and the two of them looked up in time to Oriel hit a ground ball directly to the second baseman throw the ball to the shortstop who turned and threw the ball to first base for an inning ending double play. Sending the two of them back to the dugout with looks of confusion and irritation, while Gilles picked up the two boys fielding mitts and went to meet them.

“Dang, I thought I hit it right on the button” coming from Oriel as he reached the pair reached the dugout, a claim which Carson answered.

“You did, it just went right to the second baseman” before giving Oriel a jokingly punch Oriel in the arm and letting out a laugh, Gilles meeting the two of them, handing them their gloves, and proceeding to sprint over to first base. Glancing over his shoulder and getting to briefly see Oriel return Caron’s punch in the shoulder before he reached first base. An optimism that the duo would need as four batters later they found themselves on the field in a tough situation with the bases loaded and only one out. The position of the runners sending Kyle forward to put pressure on the batter and Gilles to also move forward, but with far less enthusiasm.

‘I hope he doesn’t hit it towards me’ being the first, and without a doubt most honest, that ran through his mind as he nervously first looked toward the dugout and then to Kyle. Trying to mirror the third baseman’s actions as best he could as Jaren nodded before stepping and delivering a pitch for a strike,

“Gilles, you’re too close, back up!” causing Gilles to briefly sneak a glance over to the dugout and see Coach Pat gesturing outward from where he was standing.

“Back up!” making Gilles take two tentative steps backward, catching sight of Jaren throwing the ball as he did so, turning to see the ball reach the batter, who swung, and sent the ball off his bat. Directly toward Gilles. The sight of the white sphere speeding towards him instinctively sending Gilles’ back peddling, a slight miss step causing him to throw up his left, mitt wearing hand and tripping just in time for him to feel something impact his mitt. The feeling, and adrenaline, of the ball hitting his mitt causing him to lose track of his feet and go from tripping to falling, landing flat on his back with a sound thud, his firm landing being met with only the faintest flutter of feeling across his back.

“W-w-w-w” coming out in a faint burble from him, a thousand thoughts racing through his mind, as he felt his chest become slightly tight, causing him to panic and pat his chest with his right hand. That was until he caught the faint sight of a shadow leaping over him that caused him to take a deep breath, then glance to his left and see an opposing runner standing on first base. A second figure coming over to him from his right and snatching the ball from his mitt before looking around and challenging any runner to move, before raising his hands up in the air and turning back to Gilles.

“You, okay?” the figure asked, extending a hand, and allowing Gilles to realize the figure was Jaren, before taking it and having the older boy pull him up from the ground, his sitting up being met by a round of applause from both fans.

“What happen?” stumbling out Gilles’ confused mouth as he tried to step forward, nearly tripping over his feet again as he did so and earning him more help from Jaren in the form of an arm across the chest.

“You nearly took a line drive to the face” being all Jaren was simply replied as he steadied Gilles.

“So, are you okay?” he repeated, his words causing Gilles to glance at both dugouts before whispering.

“Yes,” causing Jaren to turn and give a thumbs up to the dugout before Gilles returned to first base. Luckily, he didn’t have to worry about being involved in any plays as the follow up batters hit a three RBIs double and a two-run home run before a strike out ended the inning and none of the following batters were able to make contact during the next inning. Leaving the team their first loss of the season and Gilles with an ice pack strapped to his head.

Chapter 10

On a normal Sunday morning, Gilles would have woken up around 8, quickly eaten breakfast, and then piled into one of his family’s cars to head off to Church. Today, however, he found himself lying in his bed, with a white half empty mug of hot chocolate on his bedside table, along with a small plate that held two pairs of pain killer pills. His head being propped up by a cold ice pack the managed to keep his head cool and the only light coming in being the natural light from the blinds over his window.

“Mom, dad, I’m fine, I don’t have a concussion” Gilles stated, his words coming as he shifted slightly so that the distinct cold of the ice pack, and the dampness of the pillow under him, would be less noticeable.

“The nurse said I was fine after the game, so I’m pretty sure I’m fine now,” he added, just as he found a slightly more comfortable spot and began to settle in.

“No, the nurse said that you didn’t have a concussion, but that you should take it easy in case you strained something” his mother corrected, her words coming before she moved the ice pack to be directly under Gilles’ head again and adding.

“Besides, you father and I thought you would’ve liked to get the extra sleep after how late your game went last night” the words earning her an eyeroll from Gilles before he turned his head away from his window to minimize the amount of light in his face.

“I might have, if I’d been able to do anything” being Gilles’ mumbled response as his mother moved the ice pack again.

“If you’d stop moving you might-” Gilles’ mother began, only to be interrupted by the sound of the garage door opening and a pair of footsteps eagerly running into the living room, the cry of.

“We’re home!” punctuating the arrival of the other half of the Tremblay family and giving Gilles a momentary bit of relief from his mother’s care.

“I’m in Gilles’ room” Gilles’ mother replied, her answer being followed by the sound of that same pair of footsteps running towards them, while a second pair of footsteps entered in from the garage.

“So, does Gilles still have a concussion?” being the first words from James as he flew into the room and hopped onto Gilles’ bed, causing the bed to shake noticeably and Gilles to throw his hands against the bedframe by the wall to steady himself.

'If I, did you might have given me seizure' running through the irritated boy's head as his mother shooed James off his bed.

"Fortunately, not" being all, she was able to say as she began to try and rearrange the blankets, the combine chaos making them all oblivious of a fourth individual's presence until their father suddenly appeared in the door.

"How're you doing Gilles?" he asked, thankfully deciding to accompany the action by leaning on the bed post rather than jumping onto the bed.

"Good, my headache is gone" Gilles began, sitting up in bed and stretching out his arms, before raising them up to stretch out his back.

"But all this laying around in bed has cramped my back" he added before turning to his left and causing an audible popping sound to be heard, turning to his left and causing another popping sound to come from his spine.

"Honestly, I feel fine, though maybe a little wetter than I'd like to be" he finished, removing the ice pack from behind his head, running a hand behind his head, and then showing it to his father to prove his point. His mother ignored his point and instead turned to direct her attention towards her husband.

"How was Church?"

"Good, though they're apparently going to be bringing in a new pastor this summer" his father began, his words causing an excitement to appear in James' face.

"Yeah, the pastor and his family were going to be from England, and they're got this cool name" James cut in, pausing to place his thumb and pointer finger under his chin in a dramatic pose before adding.

"Lie-Chester," the smile that appeared on their father's face instantly indicating to Gilles that his brother was not as spot on as he might have wanted them to believe.

“Lester, James, it’s pronounced Lester” their father corrected, pulling out his phone and looking up the name before first showing it to their mother, then to Gilles, finding that, like his brother, he was unable to connect his father’s pronunciation to the distinct spelling of Leicester.

‘English is weird,’ however, being about as far as he was willing to carry the issue, instead choosing to press his case for being wholly, or at least partially recovered from the previous evening.

“Anyway, I promise that I’m feeling better,” Gilles began, sitting up as he did so and removing the ice pack from behind his head once again, its dampness causing the hair on the back of Gilles’ skull to be slightly pasted to his scalp.

“I don’t have a headache, I don’t have problems balancing, and my stomach is fine, *tout c’est parfait*,” he stated, throwing his hands out as he did so to prove the improved state of his equilibrium. Nearly knocking over the mug of hot chocolate in the process, his mother’s quick reaction being the only thing that prevented the sugary beverage from issuing the Bugel call to ants, mice, and other kinds of vermin.

“He seems sure enough of his recovery,” his father chimed in, earning them both an eyeroll from Gilles’ mother as she returned the cup to its place on bedside table.

“Alright, if you’re sure-” she began, her words being by a cry of.

“I am, I’m 100%, 10 out of 10, 100 out of 100, completely-” only for the boy to be cut off by his mother raising a single finger and add.

“If you’re sure you’re fine you can go, however, don’t go doing anything that might cause you to have a headache” she stated, her ultimatum being followed by a single question of.

“Understand?” that Gilles’ answered with an emphatic nod of his head before hopping out of bed, bolting by his parents, and leaving the room. But not before making sure to grab James’ on the wrist on

his way out, racing the living room, eagerly putting on his shoes, and then bolting out of the front door; James' barely being able to keep up with Gilles' intense pace.

"Hey, man wait up" breathlessly escaping from James as the two of them reached the basketball hoop, Gilles' only then choosing to stop and sit down, stretch again, and smiled. The smile on his face, not even being slightly affected by the sound of his brother's labored breathing as he plopped down, right next to him.

"Sorry, I just had to get out of that room" Gilles replied, the sound of him popping the cartilage in his arm punctuating his point.

"Hey, at least, you weren't there alone" being James' attempt at lightening the conversation.

"If I'd had a concussion I would agree with you," Gilles began, more than willing to yield that point to his brother before countering.

"But I wasn't, so all of mom's fussing earned me was a damp pillow and some stiff joints," his words causing James' to laugh before slapping Gilles on the back.

"Yeah, mom can go overboard, but it's mainly when she's worried about stuff," James' relented before leaning over and elbowing Gilles in the ribs.

"Like coming home in the middle of the night to hear that her son might have a concussion."

"Well, that won't happen, at least not for a while, she's got the rest of the week off" Gilles added, his gaze falling upon the empty field and basketball court just as James mused.

"I can't wait till summer vacation starts, then we won't be the only ones at the part most of the time," earning him an inquisitive look from his twin brother.

"I thought you'd prefer the fall, because you'll be able to start playing basketball at our new school?" he asked, his question earning him a dismissive wave from James.

“Nah, I prefer summer ball more, sure there’s fewer organized teams, but you never get to just play basketball in the fall” James’ began, raising his right hand as he did so.

“You’ve got teachers, classmates, homework, grades, tests, and other school events that just leave me worn out” he added, raising a finger with each reason that he listed, each point earning him a nod from Gilles.

“No, summer ball suits me just fine, even if I don’t have a team to play it with” he concluded, falling backwards onto the grass beneath the two of them before cupping the back of his head in his hands and turning towards Gilles.

“Speaking of which, I can run home and get a ball so we can ‘horse’ or shoot some hoops if you want,” his suggestion earning him a solitary shake of Gilles’ head.

“Sorry, I can’t do ‘physically or mentally strenuous exercises’” Gilles replied, making a point of using his fingers to make air quotes before hitting the back of his head with the base of his hand, pulling a face, and sticking his tongue out as he did so.

“Doctor’s orders” coming before he too fell onto the grass beneath him.

“Besides, it’s Sunday, if I can’t rest at Church with you and dad then I’ll rest in my own way” he finished, his determined, yet cheerful tone, marking the end of the conversation and began a half hour of the two staring up at the sky, watching clouds, planes, and helicopters go by.

Luckily for Gilles, after a few days the concerns his parents had about a concussion faded like the mist on a spring day, partially aided by a visit to a doctor who passed him on a concussion protocol test with excellence. Meaning that when practice rolled around that Friday, he was able to find himself surrounded by the company that he had gotten used to, that of his coaches and teammates.

“You’re sure you’re, okay?” Coach Lamar had asked when Gilles had arrived at the batting cages in full practice gear that day, a question that Gilles had initially answered with an enthusiastic nod of his head that almost resembled a spasm.

“Yes, positive,” Gilles answered, his head shaking only getting more enthusiastic.

“If I had a concussion, I couldn’t do this” coming as he pointed to his head, and just before Coach Lamar firmly grabbed him by both shoulders to get him to stop.

“Alright, I believe you, just stop before you break your neck” the man almost begged, prompting Gilles to stop right before he added.

“But we’ll take care to slowly integrate you into one of the cage groups, so don’t expect to be hitting as much as you did last Friday,” before pointing towards a group that had Coach Pat was the head off and sending a grinning Gilles on his way. Unfortunately, Gilles found that while he was able to convince Coach Lamar of his recovery, Coach Pat was far harder for Gilles to convince. Meaning that while the rest of his group was taking turns hitting in the batting cages Gilles found himself picking up the hit balls from around the cage in between sessions for an hour.

“Come on Coach Pat, I’m fine” Gilles stated for the umpteenth time, as he picked up the balls that had been landed at the back of the batting cage following Jaren’s batting session. Hoping that this appeal to his coach would work, unlike the dozen or more times that he had done so over the course of practice. Accompanying his most current round of pleading with a smile, a pair of clasped hands, while also making sure that the coach was able to see the numerous batting cage balls that were clutched to his chest with his arms. However, if Gilles was hoping for a quick response, either positive or negative, he was forced to wait as Coach Pat instead gave a long glance towards the clock that hung on the wall above the benches where the customers waiting for a turn in the cages could sit and wait. The man looking at the clock for several seconds, looking like he was performing some mental math to see how long Gilles could

hit, and if there was time for the other members to get another round of hitting in before practice was over.

“Alright Gilles” finally breaking the silence, before the man turned towards him.

“You’ll get one round of hitting, but no more, I don’t want to risk another head injury” he added, first pointing to the side of his own head and then towards Gilles.

“Do you understand?” earning him a firm nod from Gilles along with the answer of.

“Yes Coach, crystal clear,” making sure to keep the second part of.

‘It would make more sense if I had a head injury in the first place’ to himself, before eagerly grabbing more the balls on the ground, and then running out of the cage to eagerly grab his bat as well as his batting helmet. Quickly returning to the batting cage and stepping into the batter’s box, a smile plastered onto his face while his batting glove covered hands tightly gripped the bat as he watched Coach Pat pick up the first ball from the bucket and insert it into the machine. The sight of the yellow ball flying making Gilles subconsciously tightened his grip on the bat even further and cock his hands back, before stepping and swinging. His bat hitting the ball with a soft ping, sending the ball on a line drive off towards another part of the cage while a soft jolt went up his arms, a smile creeping onto his face at the sight of Coach Pat placing another ball in the machine.

The yellow sphere speeding through the air towards Gilles, prompting him to repeat the process of cocking his hands back before stepping forward and swinging. Once again, managing to make clear contact with the ball and send it speeding off toward the back of the batting cage.

“Coach, you should have let Gilles go first” joking coming from Jaren as the boy stood outside of the batting cage, watching from the safety provided by the chain link fence as Gilles hit another ball, this time sending the sphere upwards and directly into the netting that covered the top of the batting cage. The combination of Jaren’s compliment and having hit the ball Gilles found himself beginning to softly

bounce up and down, before cocking back, stepping forward, and swatting another ball. The tension and frustration of having been made to sit out the entirety of practice slowly melting away with each ball that he managed to hit, until he finally missed a ball by only a few inches and tenths of a second.

“Not bad Gilles, 19 out 20” being the call that broke him from his trance just in time to see Coach Pat turn off the pitching machine and begin to move it to the side of the batting cage.

‘Wait, it’s over?’ crossing the confused boy’s mind, glancing over to the batting cage on his left to see Coach Lamar, and further off Taylor, going the same.

‘But I was just getting into it’ he thought, shaking his head slightly and frowning before moving to remove his batting helmet. Or at least he was, until the sound of a hand hitting plastic and the feeling of his helmet being pressed firmly against his skull caused him to freeze.

“Don’t ever take you batting helmet off in a batting cage” coming from a familiar voice as Gilles looked upwards and saw Jaren standing next to him with a strict yet benevolent smile on his face. The boy patting firmly on Gilles’ head, pressing the batting helmet down further so that it limited his ability to look upward and partially shielded his eyes from the building’s light, then added.

“I’ll help Coach Pat clean up, wouldn’t want you to get another concussion because you were distracted” in a cheeky voice that caused Gilles’ previous frown to return just as the boy jogged towards Coach Pat. Leaving Gilles to follow his teammate’s instructions of stepping out of the batting cage and then remove his helmet, just in time for a firm slap on the back from Anthony and a few compliments from Carson.

“Hey Gilles, where was that contact?” the black afro-haired boy asked as Gilles packed up his stuff and zipped up his bag, a question which Gilles could only answer with a shrug.

“I don’t know, I guess I just saw the ball better.”

“If you see it that well in one at bat every game, you’ll get on base a lot” Carson added, causing Gilles to send a casual glance Carson’s way, in time to see that his teammate was standing with a hand under his chin and his gaze at Gilles’ ball bag. His eyes looking past both the bag and its owner, instead being in deep thought, at least until Anthony reached over and proceeded to ruffle his friend’s hair.

“Carson, you’re such a nerd!” going with his action and helping to snap the boy out of his train of thought, just in time for Gilles to finish packing his bag and rise from the padded metal bench the three of them shared.

“I am not! I just think about things like this” Carson fired back before reaching out to try and mess with Anthony’s hair, only for Anthony to jump back and dodge his attempts while chanting.

“Carson’s a nerd, Carson’s a nerd” his speed allowing him to dodge all the brown-haired boy’s attempts to mess with his afro, while also allowing Gilles to sneak into the building’s front room and find his mother waiting for him, admiring the many pennants and posters that surrounded her. The sound of his footsteps causing her to snap her head toward him, a smile to come over her face, and rose.

“Ah Gilles, you’ve finished” greeting him as he reached her, a firm nod being what greeted her.

“You ready to go?” coming from her, only for Gilles to pause and point back to the door through which he came before adding.

“You have to check out with Coach Lamar and Pat,” his words causing his mother to widen her smile and let out a light laugh, answering.

“Alright,” before crossing the room and entering the door, leaving the young boy for a few minutes, and then returning, throwing an arm around Gilles’ neck, and adding.

“Let’s go,” leading him out of the front door of the business.

“So, did they let you hit the ball?” unsurprisingly being the first question that she asked, before the two of them reached the edge of the sidewalk, checked both ways, and then crossed the street.

“Not really, they mostly made me pick up the balls after each batting session,” Gilles began, still taking care to look either way as they went, only stopping when they reached the car, and his mother began to unlock it.

“But they let me get one round of hitting in at the end, and I managed to hit 19 of the 20 balls I got” he added, his announcement earning him a look from his mother in almost perfect unison with the unlocking of the car.

“That’s good, very good” she stated, before the two climbed into the car and adding.

“Maybe, you can channel some of that into your game tomorrow,” her suggestion his words greeting Gilles along with the sight of an optimistic smile.

‘My first hit in front of everyone’ crossing his mind, before the words.

“Yeah, that would be nice,” slowly crossing his lips in a dreamy manner before he buckled his seat belt, and the car began to drive away.

The following morning Gilles found himself repeating the process that he had done for two weeks in a row; he woke up, got into his baseball uniform, had breakfast, and then piled into the car with his family to head off to his next game. However, Saturday saw Gilles find another person making the journey with them to the field, for her first time that season, the thought of caused Gilles to glance out the passenger window as they road went by.

“So, Gilles, I was wondering” his mother stated, her words causing Gilles to shift his attention away from the window, as she added.

“How’s the season going? I haven’t been able to make it to any of your games so...” trailing off and leaving Gilles to connect the dots.

“Things are fine” he began, his answer drawing him an inquisitive look from James.’

“What? We won our first game 4-2 and lost our second 1-8, we’re 1 and 1, there is nothing wrong with that” he defensively added, his words earning little more than a shrug from James’ before the boy simply stated.

“I didn’t say anything,” and then returned his gaze to the window.

“Anyway,” cutting in before Gilles could add anything else, and throwing his attention back towards his mother.

“So, your teams 1 and 1, that’s pretty good” she added, a smile crossing her face before she asked.

“Do you have a hit yet?” the question causing Gilles’ smile to sag slightly while bent his head and began to scratch the back of his head.

“No, not yet” creaking out of Gilles’ mouth.

“Well, maybe he’ll get one today because we’re all here” his mother jokingly added, elbowing her husband, and asking.

“Right David?” however, his mother didn’t get the chance to respond as the car pulled into the Bagley Field’s parking lot and, taking the chance, Gilles’ proceeded to hop out of the car, grab his things from the trunk, and hurriedly make his way over towards the two-field sports complex.

‘What if I did get my first hit?’ running through his mind as he neared his head as he neared the fields, his train of thought speeding up.

‘What if I scored a run,’ coming right afterwards before.

‘What if we won, then we’d have a winning record and take a step closer to the playoffs,’ being its peak, with Gilles’ thoughts going there just as he reached the dugout where his teammates were, a fitting spot for the thought to end. As the question of winning bounced around his head throughout the pre-game warm-up and prompted him to look at the line-up, noticing that the only changes were that Taylor would bat second, Mutende third, and Jaren fourth.

‘And we’ve got Taylor pitching, so maybe we can strike early and keep them off the scoreboard’ casually crossing his mind about as casually as Anthony strolled up the plate. Unfortunately, things didn’t start out as he hoped as while Anthony put up a good fight, running the count to two balls and two strikes before fouling off five balls, eventually striking out. His fate being replicated by Taylor, who only managed to foul off six balls before fouling out, and Mutende grounded out by hitting a line drive to third that barely touched the ground. Something that Mutende didn’t see and making it so that he was easily thrown out at first due to jogging down the first base line rather than doing his normal sprint.

By contrast the opposing team, named the Athletics, and sported navy-blue hats and yellow t-shirts, managed to load the bases right off the bat before giving up a single out.

“Hey, heads up, heads, up, turn two,” coming from Coach Lamar in the dugout as the opposing clean-up hitter, a boy who was as tall as Jaren but was a slightly wider, stepped up to the plate.

“He doesn’t look fast,” Gilles murmured, before glancing over towards Kyle and, upon seeing the third baseman move in slightly, he did likewise.

“So, if we can get a ball up the middle, to Kyle, or two myself, we can probably get the runner on third out at home,” he added, seeing Taylor nod before stepping and delivering the first pitch of the at bat.

“Or maybe-” he didn’t get a chance to finish as the clang of the bat on the ball caused him to step back before he looked and saw the ball speed up the middle past Taylor. A sight that made him sprint to first, his eyes center on second base as Carson grabbed the ball, ranged over, stepped on second base, and then gunned the ball to first. Scarcely taking a moment to hesitate the last action, even though Gilles hadn’t reached the bag, and forcing the young Quebecois to try and step on first with his right foot, while stepping towards second with his left. The act causing Gilles to fall onto his right knee and stretch his arms out widely, catching the ball before falling flat on his face and earning himself a mouthful of dirt.

“Out! Out!” thankfully coming from the umpire and making Gilles’ a little less upset disgusted with the dirt in his mouth, but only a little.

“Nice play” coming from Taylor as Gilles rose from his spot on the ground, a grimace crossing Gilles’ face before he spat on the ground and answered.

“Thanks” before spitting onto the ground again, his grimace turning into a disgusted before he squinted.

“Ugh, it’s in my eyes” he added, rubbing his face, eyes, and the front of his hair to get clean. His plight earning him some aid from Taylor in the form of a few light pats on his head.

“Yeah, that’s what happens when you lay out like that” he added, taking off Gilles’ hat, dusting it off, and then returning it to his head for a lackluster.

“Thanks” from Gilles that mirrored the amount of effort his teammate had put into helping him, his word only getting him an empty shrug before Taylor returned to the pitcher’s mound and gave up another run on a single before ending the inning with a strike out. The feeling of being down two runs only slightly being blunted by a leadoff double from Jaren to start the top of the following inning.

“Come on Carson, drive him in” Anthony shouted from the dugout, as Carson stood ready in the batter’s box. His shout was almost ignored by Gilles as he sat directly next to the entrance of the dugout, able to get a clean view of the pitcher and the plate, but still being protected from any foul balls. Staring intently as Carson fouled off the first pitch, which seemed to arc away from him, before hitting the next pitch; sending it back at the pitcher, but first into the ground. The ball bouncing up into the pitcher’s glove on his right hand, sending him around to look directly at Jaren, freezing the boy, before turning and calmly tossing the ball to first for the out, while Gilles rose from his spot and headed to the plate.

“Nice try,” coming from him as he passed by Carson, offering his brown-haired teammate a high five, which was returned, and catching note of the way Carson shook his head and smile as they passed.

“You almost had it!” coming from Anthony as Carson reached the dugout and Gilles made it to home plate, stepping into the batter’s box, and firmly gripping his bat as he watched the pitcher on the mound. Watched him nod, step, and throw the first pitch of the at bat, the ball speed towards, and then past, him for a loud thwack in the catcher’s mitt before the umpire declared.

“Strike!” As the catcher rose and returned the ball back to the pitcher, the decision-making Gilles nod slightly before glance down the third base line towards Coach Lamar. His eyebrows rising slightly at the distinct sight of Coach Lamar moving his right hand to touch his nose, and then finally his left ear.

‘He wants me to bunt?’ running through Gilles’ mind as he watched the pitcher return to his place on the mound, his mind trying to recall what had been said the one time he had asked about the offensive tactic.

“Bunting? Oh, that’s simple,” Coach Lamar had answered, his words coming at the tail end of practice as Gilles’ watched the man gently try to pour the rather large bucket of whiffle balls into a large, plastic, sack.

“Really? It looks so hard on TV” Gilles’ replied, his words earning him a cheerful laugh from Coach Lamar.

“Well, that’s to be expected, they’re trying to bunt balls going over 90 miles per hour” he replied, turning, and facing Gilles.

“Bunting a ball isn’t like hitting one normally, you need to hold it gently” he began, pulling out a thin whiffle bat and then tilting it so that it was perfectly horizontal.

“Like this,” coming as he firmly grabbed the base with his left hand and then, gently put two fingers near the top of the bat.

“And when you ‘swing,’ you try to sort of catch the ball with the end of the bat like this” he added, slightly pushing on the end of the bat and made a pushing motion.

“Or, if the balls thrown hard enough, you can just stick it out there and it will bounce off it and go directly into the ground.”

‘It’s just that simple,’ Gilles’ thought, as he watched the pitcher nod, read back, and then deliver the ball. The white sphere speeding towards him, and moving inwards slightly towards him, meaning that the pitcher was trying to jam him and might have been in a normal at bat. Instead, however, Gilles simply proceeded to bring his bat down horizontally, firmly grasp it with his left hand, put his two right fingers at the top, and then make a soft pushing motion when the ball reached him. Sending the ball gently down the third base line, while proceeding to sprint towards first base as fast as his feet could carry him. Not slowing down until he firmly planted his left foot on first base, spinning around to see that the pitcher,

catcher, and third baseman were all firmly staring down the ball as it came to a stop a few steps from third base while Jaren stood on third base with a wide smile on his face.

“What happened” Gilles found himself instinctively found himself asking, Coach Pat barely being able to give an answer before the home plate umpire shouted.

“Fair ball!” the words causing Coach Pat to give Gilles a firm pat on the back.

“Well Gilles, that’s your first hit,” causing Gilles to snap his head towards the smiling man before returning his head back to the third base line, catching sight of the pitcher, catcher, and third baseman all returning to their positions. A particularly frustrated crossing the pitcher’s face as the opposing coaches began gesturing to the infield, the motions causing the shortstop to come in, and Ethan walked up to the plate. Like Carson, Ethan chose to swing at the first pitch that he saw, and like Carson he managed to contact the ball, however, unlike Carson, Ethan managed to avoid sending the ball directly to the pitcher. Instead sending the ball towards the left side of the infield, directly to the waiting shortstop, who gently flipped the ball to second baseman to get Gilles out at second, despite his close slide, who threw the ball to first for a double play that ended the inning. Leaving Ethan shaking his head at first and Gilles laying on his back at second while the opposing infield sprinted back to the dugout, energetically exchanging high fives, and donning batting gear for the next inning.

Luckily, the Mariners were able to prevent the Astros from scoring, three diving catches by Kyle at third, Anthony at shortstop, and Jaren in centerfield making sure of that. Securing the team momentum that only intensified as they managed to load the bases, at the expense of two outs, before Jaren strode up to the plate. The cheers from the dugout that greeted his arrival, not seeming to have any effect on the humble way, he stepped into the batter’s box and watched the first two pitches go by for a ball and a strike.

“Why didn’t Jaren swing at that last one?” Gilles found himself asking, his question earning him the attention of Oriel.

“What do you mean?”

“That last one, it looked like it was right where the one he hit for a double was,” Gilles clarified, taking a moment to look back from the field towards the boy, who was still wearing his catcher’s gear.

“So, why didn’t he swing?”

“It may have ended in the same location, but the first was a change-up while that one was a fastball” Oriel began, tilting his head as he did so.

“And seeing as how the first pitch was also a change-up, and he hasn’t faced his fastball yet, he may have been caught off guard,” he casually answered, prompting Gilles to raise an eyebrow.

“You can tell the exact pitch?” his question causing Oriel to give a casual nod and glance at his fingernails.

“If you’re a catcher for long enough, you can tell a lot of things even from as bad of an angle as this” he answered before the sound of another ball being caught returned Gilles’ attention to the field to see the umpire raise two fingers on his left hand and one on his right, for two balls and one strike. The sign causing the pitcher to wrinkle his nose, nod, and throw the fourth pitch of the at bat. A pitch the Jaren swung at. A pitch that he sent to the deepest part of the ballpark, before bouncing off the outfield fence the sight of the ball traveling sending all the runners going. Cheers erupting from the bench as Kyle and Anthony jogged across home plate, while Mutende found himself being held up by Coach Lamar at third base and Jaren coasted into third. Kyle and Anthony both receiving large high fives from the entirety of the dugout as they entered, and a round of applause from the parents in the stands, making the following strike out that ended the inning barely noticeable. The lack of scoring by the opposing team keeping the team’s spirits high, keeping spirits high and making it so that Gilles’ had more than enough support behind him as he stepped up to the plate.

“Start us right Gilles!” being Anthony’s words of support.

“Start us off right!” The boy echoed as Gilles’ took a long breath, looked out to watch the pitcher set, and delivered the pitch. The success of the previous at bat prompting him to at the first pitch he saw, even though it was a good two inches out of the strike zone.

‘Patience Gilles, patience’ running through his mind as he watched the pitcher compose for another pitch, this time following his own advice and watch the next three pitches. All of them breaking balls, all looking tempting, but all, thankfully, being either too far outside or too low to be registered as strikes, allowing Gilles to run the count to three balls and one strike.

“Nice job Gilles, way to be patient” coming from Coach Pat at first, the man’s encouragement, prompting Gilles to nod and watch the next pitch as it tailed towards him. Only noticing that the ball was tailing inward at the last possible second.

‘Sacre!’ racing through his mind as he swung, just barely being able to foul the ball off for a strike.

“Alright Griffin, give him another one just like that!” one of the coaches shouted from the dugout, his words earning him a nod from the boy on the mound as Gilles stepped out, took a deep breath, and a practice swing before returning to home plate, muttering.

“That breaking ball was outside, I shouldn’t have swung” as he went, not really caring if it was or wasn’t and realizing something.

‘Wait a second, how would I know that? How do I know that it was a breaking ball’ he mentally began, tilting his head towards the umpire so that he could still see the pitcher throw the ball, watching the white sphere speed towards the plate, and away from him.

‘And how do I know that-’ he mentally began as the ball hit the catcher’s mitt, only to be cut off by the umpire’s cry of.

“Strike Three!” prompting him to freeze and add.

‘That was supposed to be a ball,’ glancing down and watching the catcher rise from his spot before turning and walking back to the dugout, passing Ethan and Kyle before he took his seat on the bench. Unfortunately, that marked a shift in the momentum of the game as both Ethan and Kyle struck out and the Astros were able to get runners on first and third before we were able to record a single out. A situation that made Gilles glance around the infield at the way that Kyle and Anthony both were creeping onto the infield as Jaren shouted.

“Infield double play, outfield go three” from centerfield, his instructions prompting the two boys to move even closer to the field, prompting Gilles to think.

‘Wouldn’t it be easier for Kyle to go home instead?’ as he looked at the two boys, noting that the distance between Kyle and home plate was far shorter than that of him to second base. His focus on Kyle prevented him from noticing that Taylor threw the ball until he heard the ball hitting the bat, snapping his attention to home plate to see the ball speed directly towards Kyle. The force of the ball causing the boy to take a step backward before turning to his left, the sight of which sent both Carson and Gilles running to their bags, then throwing the ball to second base. The ball fell directly into Carson’s glove before the boy turned and tried to deliver a throw to first for the second out, only for the ball to slip out of his hand. Giving the opposing team an extra life, which they used to hit a two-run home run before the end of the inning, while a successful double play ended the game.

“Well guys, we couldn’t pull it out at the end” being Coach Lamar’s first words on the matter, as the team “huddled up” after the game, looks of frustration on each of the players’ faces, including Gilles.

“But we kept it close, and made them earn it, and you guys played great” he added, his positive words seeming to have little to no effect on most of the boys, while Gilles looked around at his teammates before scratching his head. Unsure of what he could say that might lighten the mood, particularly since his strike out in the fourth inning helped turn the game against them.

‘I should really say something’ crossing his mind before he looked around again.

‘But what can I say? It’s not like I did much,’ he mentally added, only for his thoughts to be cut off by the statement of.

“But you know what? Let’s forget the game, get it out of our system, and regroup for next week” from Coach Pat, and while his suggestion did little to entirely fix the mood of the team, and making Gilles feel conflicted as he the players went their separate way.

“Hey Gilles” stopping him from moving and prompting him to turn around and catch sight of Coach Lamar.

“I know it’s not as flashy as how it happens in the big leagues, or any professional leagues, but I got something” coming from the man before he reached into his pocket and withdrew a single, dirty, baseball.

“It’s the one you got your first hit with, I thought that you’d want it” he finished, tossing the ball to the silent Gilles as he did so, with Gilles quickly extending his hand to catch the ball before his coach left.

“What’s that Gilles?” snapping his attention from the ball to see his family standing behind him.

“It’s the ball I hit” he whispered, moving to put the ball in his plate only to be stopped by James’ racing over towards him and grabbing his hand.

“Really?” coming as he raised it to his face.

“Wish I’d something like that when I hit my first shot” absent mindedly coming him, causing Gilles’ to raise an eyebrow.

‘You did, you got to choose what we had for lunch that day.’

“Well, I guess it's something to put in your room” pulling him from his thoughts as his father took the ball from James and returned it to Gilles, before sight of groundskeepers fixing up the field caused the family to vacate the field for home.

Chapter 12

Luckily, unlike the previous week, there weren't any concerns about head trauma to stop him from having a normal Sunday morning; however, that didn't mean that he was guaranteed a normal Sunday afternoon.

"You want me to do what?" causing James to begin frantically waving his arms.

"Shush! You'll give away the surprise" coming from the younger Tremblay boy and causing Gilles to role his eyes.

"What surprise? Mother's Day isn't until next Thursday" he countered, raising his thumb before adding.

"Mom's also going to be out of town so we can work with dad," the second half of his answer earning him a firm shake of the head from James along with a round of energetic gestures.

"No, no, no, we need to get something ready before hand, so neither of us forget" he stated, raising his pointer finger as he did so before raising own thumb and adding.

"Besides, we need to get something ourselves, we're old enough," donning a broad, confident smile as he did so. Seeming to take on an attitude that indicated that he couldn't see anything wrong with his plan, and if that were the case then it would have been best if he hadn't pitched said idea to Gilles.

"If that's case, where are you going to get the money?" causing James to deflate slightly.

"Well~, you see..." James began, scratching the back of his neck.

'He doesn't have any does he,' crossing Gilles' mind before his brother reached into his pocket and withdrew a twenty-dollar bill.

"I was kind of saving up some money for a new basketball by doing things around the house for dad, and I just exchanged fifteen of the one-dollar bills and one of the fives I had for this," the sight of the dollar bill prompting Gilles to think.

'Why not just by both,' before asking the real question that was on his mind.

"Wait, dad paid you to do chores?" his tone almost sounded as though he was offended at the idea.

"When did this start happening?"

"Oh, back when we moved in dad needed help, I offered to do so and he gave me money for some of it" James answered, his clarification prompting another thought to pop into Gilles' head.

'So that's why all the tasks I was supposed to do simply disappeared,' before he lazily shook his head before asking.

"Anyway, what do you have in mind," the words causing James' face to light up before he quickly moved towards the sofa, thrusting his hand into the small are between the piece of furniture and a small coffee table, then returning. His hands firmly gripping a multicolored shopping catalogue, that was so smooth, and had such a bright glint that Gilles had to remember that James had shown him his twenty-dollar bill to not think he'd just bought it.

"Dad picked this up when we were down at the grocery store" he began, eagerly flipping through several pages of shirts, shorts, and other mundane household items.

"I looked at it and found the perfect gift for mom" coming just as he reached the catalogue's sporting section, first settling on the page entirely dedicated to baseball caps.

“I was thinking something simple, like a baseball cap and some candy” he continued, specifically pointing to a San Diego Padres baseball cap that boasted the team’s iconic SD logo and a curved bill, prompting Gilles to think.

‘Wow, it’s way more adult like than either of ours’ as his brother eagerly turned a few pages, his mind thinking of his own cap which sported a funny looking logo of a catholic monk, a “padre,” swinging a baseball.

“Or you could chip in, and we could get something like this” interrupting him from his thoughts and sending his gaze on a picture of San Diego Padres t-shirt, that looked for better than the cap that James had first shown him. That was until he caught sight of the price tag, the shirt \$36.99 which instantly changed Gilles’ mind, even before considering their state’s sales tax.

“Uh James, I hate to break it to you, but I’m broke because you did all the chores and unless you manage to magically an additional \$20 appear the shirt’s not feasible” Gilles began, his words causing James to glance down at the price tag and his eyes to swell to the size of saucers before slamming the catalogue shut.

“Also, no offense, but I’m not going into mom’s room and checking her shirts-” he began, only to be cut off by the question of.

“Why would you need to check mom’s shirts?” sending Gilles spinning around to see their father step in from the garage, an interested look on his face that caused Gilles to glance back to James. Hoping that the younger, and far quicker thinking, of them would be able to come up and with an answer.

“Oh, that’s because we just wanted to make sure none of our stuff got mixed in” causing Gilles to wince.

‘Why on Earth would our laundry, which dad sorts, end up in mom’s closet’ crossing his mind as he tried to keep his gaze on his younger brother so that his father was more preoccupied with James’ answer than Gilles’ reaction to it.

“Well, I can promise you that none of your stuff is in there, I double checked” their father answered, his tone making it clear that he was interested in James’ implication that his checking of the laundry was lacking than the suspicion that James’ was hiding something.

“Oh, good, because I didn’t want to have to look through mom’s stuff anyway” James countered, nervously putting a hand behind he did so while the faintest traces of sweat seemed to appear on his brow before Gilles chimed in.

“That would be weird anyway,” while simultaneously thinking.

‘James’ you’re out of practice,’ more than slightly relieved when his father gave the simple response of.

“You do that then” and left the living room, his departure preventing him from being able to see Gilles race over far faster than he’d done in any of his baseball games and firmly place his hand on James’ head.

“What was that supposed to be?” his words, and actions, having had a greater impact had they been the same height, instead of James’ being a full inch taller than Gilles, which made it so that they become the same height rather than giving Gilles any sort of advantage; James’s response of.

“Oh, come on, it wasn’t that bad” supporting this fact as he lazily shoved Gilles’ hand from his head.

“Really? Well next time you want to make sure none of **your** stuff got mixed in with mom’s don’t tell me” Gilles replied, his words sending James’ right hand to his head just as he rolled his eyes.

“Sheesh, there’s no pleasing you is there” he began, lowering his hand and shrugging his shoulders before adding.

“Maybe next time we get into a jam, I’ll let you do the talking, I just hope that the person asking has five minutes to spare” and moving to the front door and beginning to put on his shoes.

‘At least I’ll say something that makes sense’ being Gilles internal reply before he joined his brother.

“By the way, I was thinking mom might like some cinnamon candy if they’ve got it” instead coming from his mouth, earning him a nod from James as he stood up and went to the door.

“Yeah, yeah, mom loves that one type of candy” James added, snapping his fingers as he did so while Gilles joined him at the door.

“What’re they called again? Cinnamon Bullets? Red somethings?” coming from James as he opened and stepped through the door.

“Doesn’t matter, we’ll know them when we see them” coming from Gilles before the two of them left.

There is a certain nervousness that seems to come over most people when it comes to buying presents for friends or family and Gilles felt a similar feeling, more specifically the quality of their Mother's Day gift, the whole week leading up to Mother's Day. As he and James' decision to take a quantity of quality approach having netted them a Padres baseball cap as well as a card and a small box of dried candy for their mother. However, while most other families celebrated Mother's Day exactly on its date in May, the two Tremblay boys found themselves having to wait another day thanks to their mother's schedule and an unpleasant round of jet lag that saw their mother sleep most of Monday. Their growing anxiety, or more specifically James' excitement, forcing Gilles to focus on preventing his brother on not

ruining the surprise and shifting his gaze away from the outcome of his team's game the previous Saturday, as they waited to surprise their mother.

"Now remember, I'll do all the talking" he whispered as the two hid in the house's hallway, his words earning him a look from James.

"Why can't I do the talking?"

"Because every time we 'rehearsed'" Gilles began, taking the effort to raise his fingers and make air quotes.

"You either forgot what to say or you said what was in the gift," Gilles' description causing James to throw up his hands, in self-defense.

"Isn't it a good thing if mom knows that the present isn't a joke?" the question earning him a puzzled look from Gilles.

"Why on Earth would someone give a good parent a 'joke present' on a day like this?" Gilles' words sending James' hands up into the air.

"So, I just say 'surprise' and 'we thought really hard about, hope you like it'?"

"Yes, but you get to say the last bit alone" Gilles explained before peeking around the corner and seeing that their mother was sitting on the main chair in the living room, her gaze focused on the TV. A sight which caused Gilles to tug James and send the two slowly creeping towards the chair to remain stealthy, that was until their mother shifted her head slightly to reveal that rather than being focused on the TV, she was taking a nap. The sight causing Gilles to stop walking mid-step, without telling James, and his twin brother to plow into him, sending the two tumbling to the floor. Their collision thankfully not damaging the present, which James had decided to hold behind his back and thus ended up on his back. Nor did it cause their mother to wake up, instead only causing her to wince in her sleep and stretch

on the chair silently as the two boys tried to get up off the ground far quieter than when they had fallen on it.

“Man, mom’s a deep sleeper” James whispered as he rose, placing the present on the floor before offering Gilles and hand, then raising his twin brother from the floor beneath him.

“Well, dad does snore” Gilles relented, glancing over towards the gift, and then asking.

“Is the present, okay?”

“Oh yeah, see” being James’ answer before he opened the bag slightly, and pushed the tissue paper to the side to reveal the unaltered baseball cap and undamaged box of candy and card.

“But do you think this is a best time? Mom’s aslee-” he began, being cut off mid-sentence by the sound of someone yawning, which caused Gilles to spin around and see his mother stretching out again. Her fogged over eyes indicating that while she was most definitely awake, she was still feeling a bit weary from the joint effects of a long day of work and crossing so many time zones.

“What’s the best time?” slowly coming from her as she tried to wake up.

“Oh....” coming from James as he threw his attention over towards Gilles, seeming to hope that his brother would be able to feed him something to say. Unfortunately, as he quickly found out, Gilles was just as clueless as to what to say, having also thrown a glance over at James and hoping that his brother might say something that he could play off, even if it was something stupid.

“We weren’t sure, whether it was the best time to give you your Mother’s Day gift” coming from Gilles, before he elbowed James in the side, prompting the boy to bring the bag out from behind his back, the sight of the small gift causing their mother’s still weary eyes to light up slightly.

“Oh, thank you” she stated as she reached out and gently took the gift. First, pulling out the card, which Gilles had made sure was placed on the top, the words on it seeming to bring a smile onto her face before she added “thank you.” Then she moved the tissue paper aside and pulled out the San Diego

Padres cap then the small red box of spicy, cinnamon flavored candy, placing the cap on her head and then getting a brief sniff of the candy.

“Thank you, boys,” once again coming from her, before Gilles and James answered.

“You’re welcome,” in perfect unison, the words working perfectly with them donning similarly, pearly, white smiles; that was until James seemed to make an added declaration.

“Also, Gilles has some more news,” his words regaining him the attention of their mother as well as a confused look from Gilles.

“I do?”

“Sure, you do,” James cryptically began, leaning towards him and winking.

“Don’t you remember the outcome of your game?” the words jogging Gilles’ memory.

“Oh, right, mom my team won 5-1 on Saturday” began, his news earning him an added smile from their mother, while James interrupted with a grunt and a gesture

“And~.”

“And I managed to get walked twice and score once” he added, his words causing his mother to clap her hands together and asked.

“So, that means if you win this Saturday your team they’ll go to the playoffs, right?” receiving a nod from Gilles in affirmation.

“Oh, that’s wonderful” coming from her before she rose and enveloped the two boys in a single hug.

“It’s so good to see the two of you getting to know the people here and the neighborhood, your father and I were worried that you two wouldn’t be able to make any friends with things being so different here” she began, her words causing Gilles to look away as a single thought crossed his mind.

‘What if after this Saturday things go back to how they were back in Quebec?’

Chapter 13

That was a question, or more honestly the fear that came with it, that was nestled in the back of Gilles’ mind. Be it at breakfast, lunch, or dinnertime, be it in the afternoon when he was playing with James, with the concerns seeming to grow stronger as he took part in his team’s last regular-season practice for the year. Earning him a myriad of errors throughout the course of the practice of plays that he would normally, or at least though that he would have normally, made a decent amount of attention.

“Gilles! Gilles!” pulling him out of his thoughts only a few seconds before a baseball mitt made contact squarely with the side of his head. The blow sending him stumbling forwards several steps before he slipped and fell face first into the beautiful green grass that marked the line between the infield and outfield.

“What was that for?!” coming from Gilles as he shot up from the ground like a rocket and spun around to face a straight-faced Jaren. The almost unreadable look on the boy’s face was only being undermined by the way that he crossed his arms as though he’d managed to get some sort of point across.

“Depends” being the boy’s cryptic reply as Gilles tried to dust the various grass trimmings off his upper body, particularly his neck and his face.

“Depends, what?”

“Depends on if you’re finally done dazing off” Jaren finished, his answer prompting Gilles’ face to grow red slightly.

“I wasn’t-”

“Yes, you were,” the older boy cut off, raising a finger, and up waiving it similarly to the way that a teacher or parent would do so to an unruly child.

“Don’t lie to me, your mind was about as close to this practice field as Pluto is to the moon,” he added before placing his dominant right hand under his chin and finished.

“You know, it’s a miracle you haven’t been beamed in the head,” his words coming just as Gilles proceeded to let out a loud sneeze. The feeling of all the pollen that he’d just rolled in causing him first to feel as though he was covered in a layer of dust or ash and then to be overcome by a strong need to scratch his arms, his neck, and his face. Even making him fill his mouth up with spit before swishing and spitting to the itchy feeling which had also begun to develop in his nose and mouth, before choking out.

“Well, I think my luck ran out when your body slammed me into all the grass,” his words causing Jaren to run a hand over his face.

“Sorry,” being uttered to the sound of Gilles coughing, swishing, and spitting; giving little wonder as to why the boy asked.

“So, what was your mind on anyway?”

“Tomorrow’s game” flying from Gilles without a second thought, also causing him to pause and think before specifying.

“Or what might come after tomorrow’s game,” causing Jaren to raise an eyebrow.

“What do you mean?”

“When I was back in Quebec, I didn’t have many...” he began, pausing, clearing his throat, and rephrasing.

“...any friends, I’m still not sure I do,” the second part causing an understanding to begin to appear in Jaren’s eyes.

“I don’t want to lose any of you guys, Coach Lamar, or Coach Pat, I’ve had a lot of fun, and I don’t think I’ll see any of you when the season’s over” he added, glancing over across the field, and allowing his gaze to fall on the other seven players as he did so. Each of them seemed to mesh with each other in between practice drills like they did on the field. Anthony was goofing around as usual, messing with Ethan’s cap, Carson was trying to keep Anthony under control, earning the two of them a round of sincere laughter from Kyle and what looked to be snickering from Mutende, while Oriel and Taylor were preoccupied with something else.

“I know it’s kind of a stupid thing to worry about, I mean it’s not like you guys-.”

“It makes sense” Jaren stated, cutting Gilles off and earning him the boy’s attention.

“It makes perfect sense, way more sense than you’d expect” he added, beginning to walk towards Gilles as he did so.

“Even though everyone here except Taylor is younger than me these guys are the only real friends I have, I don’t know if I’ll make many more when I go into seventh and eighth grade, let alone whether or not I’ll keep playing baseball” he continued, reaching Gilles, and gently placing a hand on his shoulder.

“But you know what? Worrying about stuff like that, stuff that’s off in the far future or that you can’t control, only ruins what you’re given in the present and where’s the fun in that” he finished, his words causing Gilles to look down at the ground.

“What if we lose?” creeping out as he did so, finding that the thing that had fueled his social isolation bubbling back to the surface.

“We lose” simply coming from Jaren, the boy choosing blunt honesty over a white lie.

“But you know, if everyone on this team only hung out with you because of the fact you could fill a hole on our team, they weren’t your friends in the first place” he added, taking his hand off Gilles’ shoulder and placing it in front of the boy’s chest to silently say.

“Even if that happens, you’ll have a friend in me,” a hand that Gilles took.

Chapter 14

It was with these words in the back of his head that Gilles found himself walking down the familiar path asphalt path that led to the Bagley Fields baseball complex, with his bag slung over his shoulder. Taking care of the other players who passed him, most of them sporting smiles, a few sporting looks of indifference, and a rare few seeming to be tearing up on something. But all of them being accompanied by at least one parent who was proud of them or trying to cheer up the children who were tearing up.

“Man, they must have played some intense games” breaking Gilles from his silent observation and causing him to glance to his left and see James watching the other children go by. His arms placed lazily behind the back of his head, while he leaned back slightly in a way that the mere sight of made Gilles’ back ache.

“Didn’t you cry last year when your team got eliminated from the school’s basketball tournament?” tumbling out of Gilles’ mouth as he raised an eyebrow, not entirely sure as to what he was expecting James to say.

“Yeah, but that was long before I knew we were moving” James began, his unchanging posture mirroring his firm opinion.

“It was stupid, only three of the guys on the team were my friends, the rest were jerks,” surprising Gilles and causing a tiny bit of insecurity to begin to build in his stomach, before he asked.

“Do you talk to the three who were your friends?”

“Oh yeah, all the time,” James answered, his words coming just as rapidly as he suddenly snapped his head towards Gilles.

“We exchanged phone numbers before we left, but it’s gotten a little harder since we moved because of the time difference,” his words sending a small feeling of relief through Gilles that almost managed to erase the previous feeling of insecurity. Almost.

“Anyway, you’d better get going to the dugout so that I can find mom, dad, and I a place to sit” being Gilles’ only warning before he received a firm smack on the back.

‘I really wish people would stop doing that’ racing through his mind as a faint stinging feeling went through his back, the already unwelcome gesture, that had seemed to only gain popularity since they had arrived in Vancouver. Being made worse by the fact that everyone managed to hit the same spot, making Gilles roll his shoulder for what felt like the hundredth time as he moved towards the complex. Making the mental note to tell his teammates, and family, about how he felt as he reached the home dugout where his teammates had gathered; his heads-up manner allowing him to narrowly dodge attempts by Anthony to slap him on the back before the team performed their pregame warmups. Making sure to sneak a peek at the batting order, which only had the difference of Jaren batting second, and pitching, while Mutende batted fourth, before taking his seat on the bench with his glove in his lap.

“So, you ready?” causing him to raise his head and catch sight of Carson standing next to him, leaving Gilles to answer.

“Yeah, yeah” in a soft whisper, while tilting his head back and forth. However, if Carson felt the unsureness in Gilles’ response, he didn’t pry into it, instead electing to end the conversation with a simple.

“Good,” before turning and grabbing his own glove, leaving Gilles to look across the field as the opposing team, the Reds, eagerly went about their dugout, before several of his own teammates walked past him, prompting him to get up and head to the field. Luckily, this game began like all the others, with neither team managing to score in the first inning, as Jaren managed to strike out the side, while Anthony grounded out, Jaren hit a pop fly to deep right field, and Taylor struck out. The first action only came in the second inning when the Reds managed to get a leadoff infield single and two back-to-back walks to load the bases with no outs.

“Come on Jaren, settle down” coming from Coach Pat in the dugout as Coach Lamar signaled for Anthony and Kyle to cheat in.

“It’s okay Jaren, shake it off” also coming from the stands as Gilles looked around the field to size up the runners and the position of his teammates on the infield.

‘Of the three runners the one on first looks to be slowest’ he began, glancing the runner up and down as he did so.

‘So, any double play will include him, but the runner at second is also slow’ he added, glancing over to second base, or more specifically the way Carson was playing close to the bag so that any double play would be easy to pull off, before turning his attention back home to see Jaren moving to throw the ball.

“It doesn’t matter, there won’t be a play at home so that means the ball should be coming my way” barely managing to escape his lips before the batter contacted the ball. Sending the white sphere speeding directly between third base and second base, where Kyle normally would have been playing had he not been in his current position. Forcing Anthony to move far over to his right, pluck the ball from the

dirt with his mitt, and then make a play in the opposite direction to where his momentum was taking him. His only play being to try and tag the runner that was coming from second, something which normally would have worked. Had the ball been firmly grasped in his hand and not loosely held in his mitt, instead the force of the runner running into the mitt, surprising everyone by not trying to dodge Anthony's tag, and Anthony's backwards momentum caused the ball to pop out of his mitt and land on the ground.

"No tag, runner is safe!" coming from the lone infield umpire as Anthony dove to the ground while trying to catch the ball, only managing to catch a face full of dirt before Kyle ran over and picked up the ball, the play being serenaded by a round of applause from the visitor's stands.

"It's okay Anthony!" coming from Coach Lamar as Jaren jogged over toward where Kyle stood and Anthony lay, initially getting a softly tossed ball from Kyle before requesting, and receiving, time. Reaching his two teammates and helping Anthony off the ground, seeming to whisper something to the frustrated shortstop, while Kyle tried to dust some dirt off Anthony's shirt. His words getting a few nods from Anthony before he patted the afro-haired boy on his cap and jogged back to the pitcher's mound, seeming to have relieved Anthony of some of his frustration. Frustration that made it so that on the next pitch, when the ball was hit by Carson, Anthony was desperate to run over to cover second and call for the ball. Only for his calls to be ignored as Carson raced over, stepped on the base, then step, and fire the ball towards first.

"I got it" subconsciously flying from Gilles' mouth as he stretched forwards, his right foot planted firmly on first, and caught the ball with a light grunt.

"Nice play Carson."

"Nice catch Gilles" coming from the stands as the runner from third crossed the plate, putting the Reds up 2-0. Unfortunately, this wasn't the end of the scoring, however, as the Reds would manage to get a single that would make the game 3-0 before Jaren would get the final out of the inning and return to the dugout.

“It’s okay guys,” greeting them as Coach Lamar and Pat stood at either side of the dugout’s entrance, with Coach Lamar making a point of catching Anthony.

“Hey, kid, calm down” he began, as Anthony looked up to him.

“It was a tough play, you shouldn’t have been there because the batter aimed the ball directly between you and Kyle, that’s my bad, okay” he clarified, his words earning him an empty nod of his head before entering the dugout right before Gilles.

“It’s okay Anthony, you made a better play than I could have” being his attempt at cheering the afro-haired boy up, Anthony seeming to ignore his words like those of Coach Lamar as he went to the far side of the dugout. Which is where Anthony stayed, sitting silently, as Mutende scratched out a leadoff walk, Carson advanced Mutende to second base with a difficult ground ball to third, and Ethan advanced Mutende to third by grounding out to second.

“Alright Gilles let’s make some good contact,” along with “not knowing how many outs there were, being the excuse Gilles used to glance over towards the dugout and see Anthony still sitting at the far edge of the dugout.

‘Make good contact, wait for your pitch’ running through his mind as he returned his head towards the pitcher and lightly removing his bat from his shoulders as he stepped into the plate, the words motivating him to watch the first two pitches go by for balls.

“Come on Allen, focus and get it over the plate” following the second pitch of the at bat, while Gilles threw a casual glance around the field to catch sight of a possible weak spot to exploit. His eyes eventually fell on the left fielder, or more specifically the fact that the left fielder was playing slightly deeper than the rest of the outfield.

‘That should work’ running through his mind as he returned his focus back to the mound and watched the pitcher nod, before stepping forwards. The ball flying from his hand and speeding through

the air on a beeline that differed from the gentle curve that the first two pitches had displayed. Prompting Gilles to cock back his arms, step forwards, and swing through the ball. His bat barely made contact before he turned towards the third base line, sending the ball on a line drive toward left field. While causing Mutende and him to take off running, both absolutely convinced that Gilles would manage to at least get a single because of the left fielder's location.

'Come on! Drop! Drop!' speeding through Gilles' head as he watched the left fielder make a desperate brake from the outfield toward the ball, the combination of his position in the outfield and his late jump no doubt guaranteeing a base hit and an RBI under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, Gilles was about to learn that little in baseball operated under "normal circumstances," as on coming in from the outfield, the left fielder managed to trip and dolphin dive towards the infield. His momentum sending him forward and allowing his outstretched glove to barely slide under the ball to rob Gilles of a base hit and record the last out of the inning. Earning the opposing left fielder earned a barrage of high fives, slaps on the back, and pats on the head from his teammates as he left the field while sending Gilles back to the dugout frustrated, muttering.

"Darn! I almost had it" as he went.

"That you did, it was a heck of a play" greeting him as Jaren extended him his mitt while taking Gilles' batting helmet off his head, leaving his cap behind, and added.

"But the play's done, it's time to focus on fielding," turning toward the dugout and finishing with and firm.

"Right Anthony?" a question which the young boy answered by running toward them, jumping up, firmly patting Jaren on the top of the head, and accidentally knocking off his cap before answering.

"Don't need to tell me twice" then speeding off towards the infield, making sure to be far out of Jaren's reach before the older, and far taller, teammate managed to pick up his cap and chase after him. Leaving Jaren and Gilles to take their positions, and do the between half inning warm up, before Anthony

got a chance to prove he was a man of his word and prove it he did. As the first batter of the inning hit a ball directly at him, hoping he might get some of his teammate's earlier luck, sending Anthony sprinting in from his position to reach down, grab the ball with his mitt, and transfer it to this throwing hand. The speed of the act barely gave Gilles enough time to process the whole thing as Anthony reached into his mitt, planted his foot, and fired the ball.

'Here it comes,' barely making it out of his mind and his glove hand barely being able to reach out his mitt before the ball reached him, causing his whole torso to move backwards and an.

"Umph" to escape his lips as he got the ball, making him more than thankful that the slow speed of the runner made it easy for the umpire to signal him as being out. It also made Gilles lucky that he wasn't involved in another play as Jaren managed to strike out the next batter, while the final batter of the inning hit an infield fly to Carson at second base to end the inning. Kyle led off the bottom of the second with a double that was followed up by a sacrifice bunt by Oriel that placed him on third base as Anthony strode up to the plate.

"Alright Anthony, make your mark."

"You got this," and.

"Just need some contact Anthony, a sacrifice fly will do," accompanying him as he did so, calls that he met with confident glance and wink of the eye before he stepped into the batter's box and watched the first pitch go by.

"Good eye Anthony, good eye" earning the bench a confident nod of his head as he glanced down the third base line and turned towards the pitcher, his actions causing Gilles to whisper.

"Do you think he's really forgotten about the mistake at shortstop?" to Jaren as the pitcher nodded and then delivered the ball.

“If he hasn’t yet-” Jaren began, only to be cut off by the convincing sound of clean contact and the sight of the ball floating through the air and looping into shallow right field for the single that scored their first run of the game.

“He has now!” barely being audible over the sound of cheers that came from the dugout. The second half of Jaren’s answer being accompanied by the sight of Anthony smiling while receiving a firm high five from Coach Lamar at first while Jaren hurried to grab his bat and helmet. His own ground ball that led to an inning ending double play barely seeming to have been noted with all the high fives that Anthony got, his arrival resembling that of someone who hit a walk off rather than scored just one run. Momentum that stayed with them throughout the top of the next inning that was dominated by a strike out by Jaren to start off the inning and two straight infield pop flies to third base and second base to end the inning. While the opposing team managed to also manage to avoid letting anyone get on base, things didn’t change until the opposing Reds managed to load the bases on two singles and walk.

“Infield!” coming from Coach Pat, along with a wave of his arm, as he slowly walked towards the pitcher’s mound, sending everyone towards him. Gilles arrived just in time to fit into the small circle around the mound as Jaren took the ball out of his glove and moved to give it to Coach Pat, only for Jaren to be turned down by a wave and the words.

“I’m not here for that,” before he looked around the circle, taking care to bend down so he was at the same height of everyone, not just Jaren.

“Okay, we’ve got the bases loaded with no one out, what does that mean?” he instead began before pausing.

“There’s an out at every base” Gilles answered, his words earning him an approving smile from Coach Pat.

“That’s right, and what’s the most important thing we can do?”

“Get the out at home” Anthony eagerly replied, causing Coach Pat to shake his head.

“Not quite.”

“We need an out at any base” Carson corrected, his words earning him a smile and nod from Coach Pat like the one Gilles had gotten.

“That’s right, any out at any base” Coach Pat began, before turning to Jaren and adding.

“So, you just need to put a ball over the plate that the batter can put in play, and we’ll get that out,” his words, causing Jaren to open his mouth in protest, only for Coach Pat to place a hand on his shoulders.

“Jaren, forget the runs and just focus on pitching, the eight boys behind you have your back,” before looking around the circle and finally adding.

“Now let’s get some outs” the looks on everyone’s face implying that his words were still ringing in their ears, everyone that was excepts Anthony and Jaren. As Jaren’s face only seemed to be slightly more relaxed on the mound, while Anthony jogged slowly back to shortstop and made sure to glance back at home plate before he reached his position. Jaren seemed to relax as while the batter hit his next pitch it stayed in the infield and bounced to the area between third base and pitcher, the ball sending Anthony sprinting into the infield to grab the ball. Under handing it back toward Oriel at home plate, the ball barely landing in Oriel's glove before the runner reached home plate, for the first out of inning. The inability of runners to lead off allowing Anthony a sizable advantage and earning him a high five from Jaren as he passed the mound.

“Hey, that’s one, let’s get it going” being Jaren’s rally cry as got the ball from Oriel and returned to the mound, his return being mirrored by the sight of Kyle glancing at the runner who was now on third base and proceeding to move in so far that he was even with the pitcher's mound, while still being on the

third base line. His actions caused Coach Lamar to squeeze past Coach Pat before cupping his hands over his mouth as Jaren moved into his delivery.

“Remember infield, turn-” only being cut off by the batter making firm contact with the ball, sending it directly to Kyle who threw it home for the second out.

‘Good, now with two we can get back into normal position’ Gilles thought, only to pause slightly as Oriel stepped off home plate.

‘No, Oriel no!’ speeding through his head as he watched the young boy turn towards him and then gun the ball his way. The sphere racing past the batter on the first base line, partially blocking the ball from Gilles’ view and forcing him to try and step diagonally to the left, away from the bag. Only having a second to reach his left arm backwards before the ball reached him, the smack of the ball landing in the webbing of his mitt coming only a few seconds before the runner reached first. Completing the 5-2-3 double play, ending the inning, and sending the whole of the team eagerly running back to the dugout for the warm greeting from both coaches and their parents. Their excitement increased with a leadoff walk by Ethan before Gilles managed to stumble up to the plate.

“Alright Gilles, make some good contact” greeting him as he stepped into the batter’s box and watched the first two pitches go by for a ball before the Reds pitcher managed to record his first strike.

‘Okay, that was on the outside and the one I contacted was practically down the middle’ coming through Gilles’ mind as he watched the pitcher go into his windup.

‘So, he’ll try to hit the far side of the plate’ being added as the pitcher released the ball, initially looking to have made the same mistake as that in the second inning.

“So, I’ll hit it up the middle and put Ethan on third!” coming out in a quiet whisper as he swung, aiming directly at the ball to send it right back where it came from. Only to see the ball curve inwards towards his hands, causing him to instinctively release his right hand, leaving him only swinging with his

left hand. Sending the ball directly into the ground with a dull “clunk” and Gilles sprinting down the first base line, feeling the firm dirt beneath his feet propel him forwards with each step. His pace picking up at the sight of the first baseman stepping off the bag to get the catcher’s throw.

‘Come on, come one’ reaching the edge of his mind just as he reached first base, a half step after the first basemen, giving the Reds an out at the price of advancing the runner.

“It’s okay, kid” being Coach Pat welcome, along with a soft pat on the back, that his effort earned him as he turned toward home plate and jogged toward the dugout, picking up his bat as he went. The team not managing to monopolize Ethan being on second base despite collecting two more walks, both of which were canceled by two strikeouts. Making it so that after shutting down the opposition in the top of the sixth inning, the Mariners came to bat down two runs in what might be their last inning of the season with only two hits.

“Hey, everybody gather round and listen up!” naturally being Coach Lamar’s reaction to the situation, his words earning him a weird semi-oval around where he sat on the bench.

“We’re in the bottom of the sixth, down two runs, do you know what this means?” he asked, his words causing all nine of the players in the dugout to exchange looks and prompting him to repeat.

“Do you guys know what this means?”

“It’s rally time!” Oriel answered, the words leaving his mouth at the most measured pace imaginable and an uncertainty in his voice that was only erased with a confirmation of.

“Your darn right it is” from Coach Pat.

“So, we need to be as lively as possible” Coach Lamar added, shifting the attention back to him.

“I want everyone chanting, clapping, and getting involved for each person who gets to the plate” he continued, pointing to each player as he did so.

“We’ve been silent all game, we need some support, get into it so that when we get the first man on base, we can steal the momentum to tie, and so once we tie, we can put ourselves on track for a walk off” he added, his clarification coming before he asked two questions.

“You got it?” which was met with a loud.

“Yes, coach!” before then turning to Coach Pat asking.

“Whose first?” sending the assistant coach across the dugout to the batting order where he traced his finger down the paper before answering.

“Taylor,” sending Coach Lamar’s attention over to the young glasses wearing boy.

“Alright Taylor, get us going” earning Taylor a round of pats on the back as he nodded before turning, grabbing his bat and helmet, before slowly walking to the plate. His slow pace almost managing to mask the way he was shaking slightly as he prepared to start what was potentially his final bat of the game.

“You think he’s nervous?” being the first words to come from Gilles’ mouth as he glanced over to Jaren.

“I don’t know” the boy began, his attention focused squarely on the plate so that it almost seemed like he was ignoring Gilles.

“But regardless as to whether he does or doesn’t, I’m not going to bat this inning, we’ll either walk it off, send it to the seventh, or the season will end” leaving his mouth as Taylor reached the plate, cupping his hands around his mouth as the pitcher went into his windup.

“Come on Taylor, don’t wait, put good-” his encouragement being cut off by the sight of Taylor swinging and, more importantly, the sound of the bat hitting the ball. His swing sending the ball on a high line drive into deep center field, sending the centerfield and leftfielder scrambling to try and cut the ball off, as it was clear from the moment the ball left the bat that neither of them would be able to catch it.

Their efforts fell short as the ball managed to land about two steps from the wall, bounce, and proceed to go directly into one of the holes of the outfield fence, just as Taylor began to round first base. The sight sending both fielders' arms directly into the air before turning around to face the umpire near second base, prompting the umpire to also raise his hands.

“Time! Time!” flying from his lips before pointing to Taylor, who had slowed to light jog, and then added.

“Runner goes to second” before pointing to second base, the declaration earning both him and Taylor a round of applause from the parents and, more importantly, cheers from the dugout.

“Alright, that’s a start! That is a start!” coming from Jaren before he gave a high five to Carson, who was now slapping high fives with teammates, not seeming to care that Anthony managed to duck in multiple times to get at least six high fives. Their excitement and noise making it so that the tiny group barely managed to hear the distinct “thump” of a ball hitting something, tearing their attention away from their celebration and back to the plate. Where Mutende stood leaning against his bat, his hand on his hip, his face aimed towards the umpire, and a look of discomfort that almost seemed to border on pain on his face. The pain he refused to cry out at instead causing him to squat down and stand-up multiple times as Coach Pat reached Mutende. Both Coach Pat and the umpire taking a great deal of interest in the tall, dark-skinned boy’s well-being, their mouth moving at the speed of lightning as they proceeded to ask Mutende a flood of questions.

“Do you think he’s hurt?” slipping past Gilles’ lips at the volume of a whisper and earning him a look from Carson that could only be described as a mixture of being surprised at Gilles’ question while also not being sure that Gilles was serious.

“I don’t think anyone can get hit by a ball going over 40 miles per hour and not be hurt” being Carson’s first answer, prompting Gilles to look towards his friend while Carson turned his attention to the field.

“Now being injured, well...” he began, slurring the last word as he watched Mutende rise from the ground before adding.

“I don’t think so,” if Mutende wasn’t physically hurt the team’s rallying spirit was as Carson only managed to advance the runners with a weak ground ball down the first base line and Ethan struck out. Pinning the hopes of the team, and the attention of the entire bench, squarely on Gilles as he slowly stepped up to the plate. His bat on his shoulder, his helmet on his head, and his eyes staring past the large cage on the front that, while originally intended to protect his face, now seemed to prevent him from running away. The beating of his heart felt as though it was getting faster with each step to the plate until it felt like it was going to fly out of his mouth.

‘Okay, okay, okay’ starting to repeat in his mind as he watched the pitcher nod, step, and deliver the first pitch.

“Okay Gilles, calm down” reaching his ears, making his turn towards the pitcher mound a little easier, but it did not make the bat in his hands feel any lighter. Which was a good thing, as if he had been able to raise it from his shoulders, he might have been tempted to swing the bat the first ball he saw near the plate, but, missed by about two inches.

“Ball” instead easing the weight on his shoulders, but not making it wieldable.

“Good eye Gilles, good eye” motivating him to try and focus on the ball as it neared, but not loosening his frozen shoulders. Which was also good, because if his shoulders had not been frozen, he might have tried to use them to swing so hard that spark erupted from the cover of the ball. What instead unfroze his shoulders was the sight, from the corner of his right eye, of the catcher rising from his place, extending his arms out, and boldly declaring.

“Come on Allen, he’s not going to swing, just toss three balls down the middle and let’s end this,” the words loosening his shoulders, lowering his bat, and causing his eyes to focus on the pitcher as he caught the catcher’s throw and walked around the mound.

‘Okay, okay, right down the middle, the fastest pitch he has,’ starting up in his mind, his eyes’ training, like those of a hawk, on the pitcher as he rubbed his foot on the mound and then looked directly towards the plate. Causing Gilles to feel, if only for a second, that the pitcher was not looking at the catcher’s glove, but directly at him before he nodded to deliver his pitch.

‘Okay then, if that’s the case, then I’ll send it back where it came’ echoing in his head as the pitcher released the ball, the white sphere going on a beeline down the middle as the catcher had called for, just as Gilles stepped forward and began to swing.

‘Back up the middle!’

“Hey Gilles,” had called at the end of batting practice one Friday, causing him to look up from his baseball bag at Anthony. Barely having time to say anything before he felt something shoved into his chest, sending his eyes down to catch sight of a small magazine on his lap.

“I noticed you’re having trouble batting, this might help” only coming from Anthony before he turned away, leaving Gilles to open the magazine and catch sight of not only the page, but the specific statement from someone who was professional batting instructor.

“There’s a thing about hitting, you always feel it when you hit the ball wrong, but when you hit the ball right-”

‘-You feel nothing’ he thought the words echoing in his head as his bat contacted the ball and remained silent. The ball shooting right back up the middle, past the pitcher and between the second baseman and the shortstop, sending Taylor sprinting home and Mutende running to third. Mutende being held up at third by an authoritative combination of Coach Pat raising his hands in the air and shouting.

“Stop, stop, stop!” sending Gilles attention to the fact that because he’d hit the baseball so perfectly the ball had gone directly to the centerfielder on a line drive. Making any attempt to send Mutende to home plate, without the aid of a fielding or throwing error, guaranteed to end poorly. What it

didn't make Gilles, was ready to for the slap on the back he received from Coach Lamar, that was so hard that he had felt himself partly spin around.

"Way to go Gilles, your first hit!" greeting him as he received a high five, the moment they high fived being the moment that Gilles realized what he'd done. Breathing heavily as he slowly turned around to see his teammates in the dugout, Coach Pat in the third base coach's box, several parents in the stands, and even Mutende cheering and applauding him before muttering.

"I... I, did it."

"Hey Gilles, focus" sending him back to reality and returning his attention to home plate as Kyle stepped to the plate, while Gilles slowly stepping off first.

"Come on Kyle, keep us going," being the first words that came from the dugout as Kyle got his first pitch for a ball, the call earning him a couple of cheers from the dugout. Cheers that got more intense when the second pitch was called a ball and he managed to foul off the third for a 2-1 count in which he had all the momentum.

"Alright Kyle, do what Gilles did."

"Yeah, send it back up the middle," both coming the dugout on the fourth pitch, before Kyle fouled another ball off. This one speeding down the third base line and causing Mutende to jump, what looked about, six inches into the air before one added in the fact, he tucked his feet in, and only being foul because it bounced off the bag.

"Come one Gilles, just straighten it out a bit, straighten it out!" Carson shouted as Kyle paused, took a deep breath, and stepped back into the batter's box as Coach Lamar whispered.

"When Kyle sends this ball to the outfield, I want you to run like the wind and score from first" getting him a nod from Gilles, particularly noting the fact that Coach Lamar had said.

"And score from first," rather than.

“And try to score from first,” making him dig his left foot into the infield dirt as the pitcher began his windup. The instructions repeating in his head as the pitcher released the ball, speeding up as it floated towards the plate, becoming deafening as Kyle swung, and then falling silent as he missed. Ending the inning, ending the game, and ending the season; sending the Reds jumping for joy, while leaving the whole of the Mariners bench silent except for Kyle, Mutende, and Gilles. Who made their return to the dugout while Coach Lamar and Coach Pat, went to the Reds dugout to briefly shake hands with their coaches. The brief period they were gone being filled with more silence.

“Hey guys, guys” breaking the silence as the two of them returned.

“We need to line up,” Coach Pat added, both men seeming to note the empty way that the team began to follow their instructions and prompting him to sit down on the bench nearby the entrance.

“Guys, we had a great season” he began, his words earning him some attention from the team.

“We scored a lot of runs and made a lot of plays” he added, the first point earning Jaren a pat from Taylor while Anthony got a playful jab in the ribs from Oriel. Whether it was harder than a “normal” playful jab Gilles didn’t know, but it did manage to get a small smile to creep onto Anthony’s face.

“We got closer than ever before to making the playoffs and representing the league” sending no less than six glances towards Coach Lamar, who was also focused on Coach Pat.

“Heck, Gilles even managed to get his first hit and his first run in his baseball career” causing Gilles to feel someone firmly pat his shoulder.

“And that was all fun, but the season’s over, we lost, and now we need to end the season the right way” he finished, rising as he did so before pointing towards home plate, where the opposing team was gathering before leaving, and slowly, slowly, the rest of the team followed. The season was over, they had come up short, but as Gilles glanced over his shoulder while he found his spot in line, he swore he could

see a few gestures of happiness below the faces of disappointment. Causing the corners of his mouth to turn up slightly and think one thing.

‘We’ll be back next year, and next year, we’ll win.’

